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The Many Faces Of Horror

ANDREW REINER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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In my early years at *Game Informer*, a Capcom representative visited our office with a handful of upcoming games. After demoing the expected lineup of fighters, shooters, and a side-scrolling adventure featuring a blue metal boy, the rep pulled out an early build of a new game called Biohazard. He wasn't saving the best for last, and instead treated it like an oddity that he didn't really know how to pitch. While I can't remember exactly what the demo showed; I remember being impressed by its visuals, but questioned the flow of action.

Roughly a year later (and after a name change in America), Resident Evil was born. Few games have come along and upended trends in the same way. Suddenly, we were fearful of what may unexpectedly jump out at us, and we had to learn to conserve ammo in an age where most games let us hold down the "shoot" button. This one brilliant release gave rise to the survival horror genre and played a large role in paving the way forward for storytelling, cinematography, and intensity of action in games.

Capcom kept Resident Evil's flame burning hot with a bombardment of sequels that delivered more of the same, and then shocked us again with Resident Evil 4, a game so different in feel and flow that it could have been the start of something new. While being heralded by many (myself included) as the best Resident Evil to date, it's also important because it marked the beginning of a continuous evolution for the series. Every game that followed has been quite different, so much so that we don't even know what viewpoint a new entry will be played from.

As you flip through this magazine and read about Resident Evil Village, you'll once again be hit with the feeling that this is an entirely different Resident Evil experience, filled with new horrors and gameplay ideas. I love seeing Capcom take chances in big ways like this, and it is always done with the utmost care. In just a couple of months we can all play Village, and hopefully will be left wanting more and dreaming of what Resident Evil 9 could be.

As always, be safe, be happy, and game on!

38 Resident Evil Village

In Village, Resident Evil 7: Biohazard protagonist Ethan Winters travels to a dilapidated Eastern European village and battles a pack of hungry werewolves to rescue his newborn daughter. With this newest survival horror experience, Capcom took direct inspirations from the fan-favorite Resident Evil 4, so we spent time with the game and its developers for the full story. ***by Ben Reeves***

10 **The Best Of Switch**
We polled the entire *Game Informer* staff to figure out what games we think you need to play on Nintendo's handheld-console hybrid.

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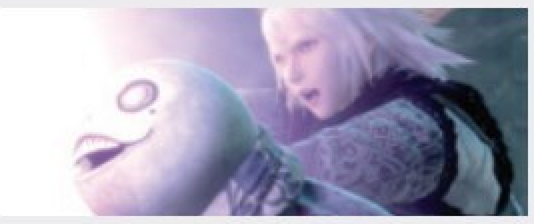
With four critical darlings under its belt, we interview the team at Supergiant about its studio history, game development philosophy, and hopes for the future.



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PROFITABILITY
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Through ups and downs, the Resident Evil series has been a cultural juggernaut for a quarter century now. We look back at a handful of the series' most important games to date.

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The Aliens franchise doesn't have the best history with video games. We took a look at developer Cold Iron Studios' attempt at changing that.

64 Pokémon Legends Arceus

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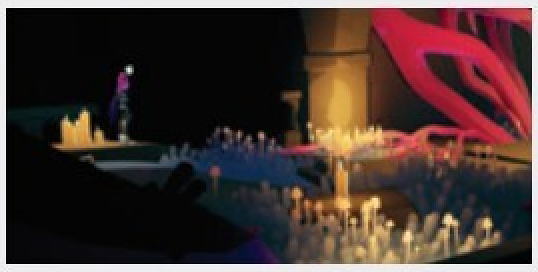


66 Solar Ash

We loved developer Heart Machine's first game, Hyper Light Drifter, and we're interested to see where the studio goes next.

67 Fights In Tight Spaces

The name says it all. We checked out this unique indie title with an interesting take on combat.

69 Sifu

Find out why this intimate brawler from the Absolver team is a game to keep your eyes on.

70 Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance

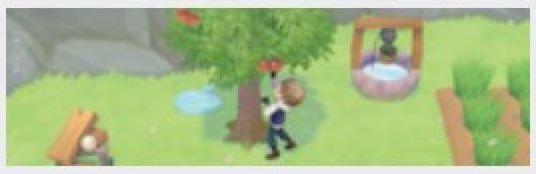
We played the newest co-op D&D game; learn why we're optimistic for its release.

77 Monster Hunter Rise

After the success of Monster Hunter World, find out if this new entry stands up among the rest.

78 Disco Elysium: The Final Cut

Revisit one of the best games of 2019 – this time on consoles.



79 Story Of Seasons: Pioneers Of Olive Town

If you're a fan of farming simulators, find out if Story of Seasons is the excuse you need to go back out in the field.

80 It Takes Two

A quirky romp through the tribulations of divorce, after spending time with this co-op adventure, we're ready to tell you why it's one of the best games of 2021.

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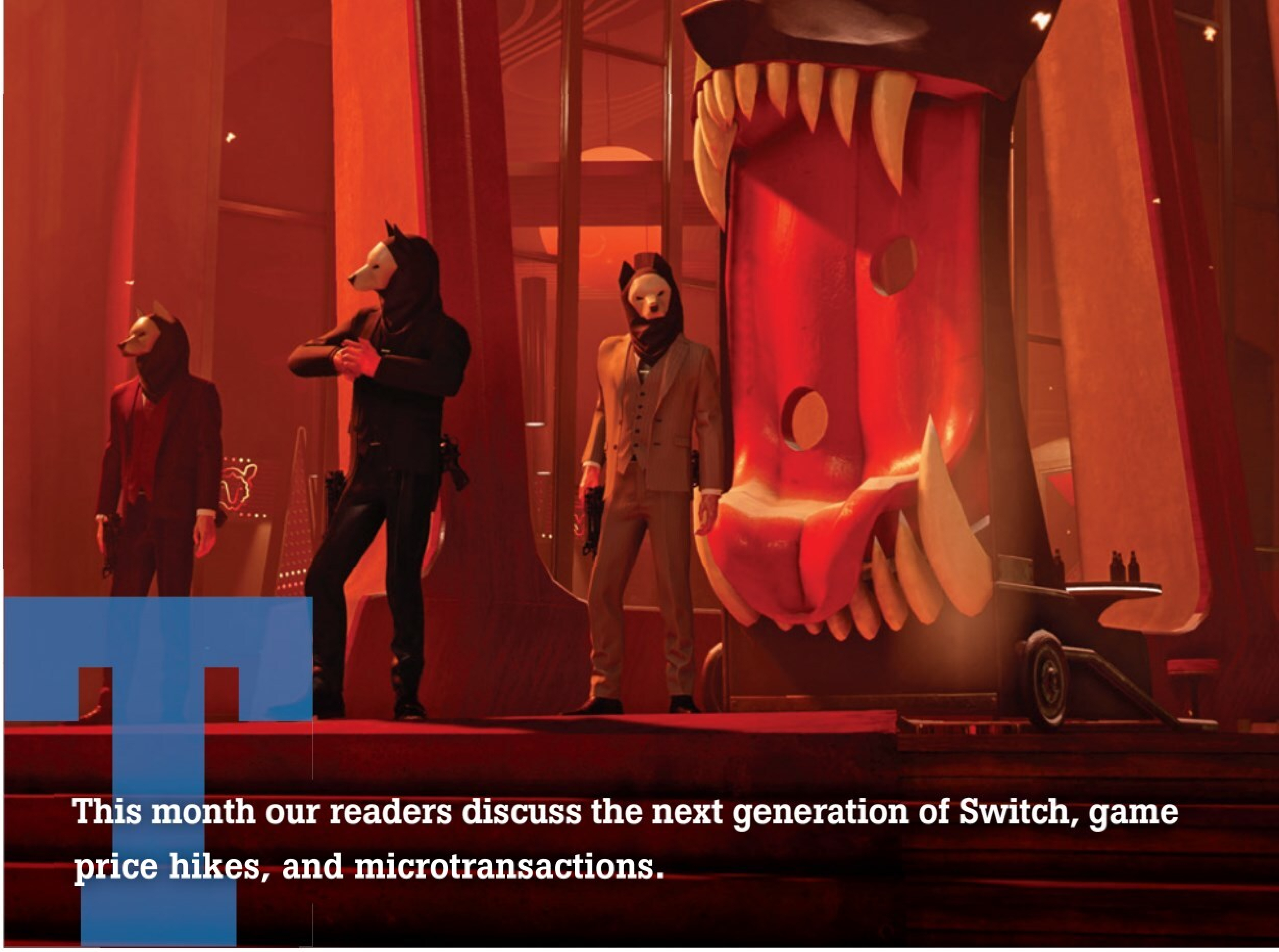


This month our readers discuss the next generation of Switch, game price hikes, and microtransactions.

Deathloop

I have to say I'm a bit baffled that Deathloop is a PlayStation 5 exclusive (and PC). Arkane, the company that makes it, is owned by Microsoft. I realize exclusive deals are made all of the time. Arkane and Bethesda are fulfilling a contract they made with Sony before getting purchased by Microsoft. That's apparent. But is there a risk of Microsoft pulling the funding out of development since it is on a rival platform?

Jarrod Velders
Thunder Bay, Ontario

Deathloop sounds wildly ambitious and unlike anything else out there. This is one of those games I just want to see to believe. I got the same feeling when I read about Prey and Dishonored, but I didn't feel Arkane truly delivered on their visions. I hope Deathloop is more fully realized, and truly embraces time loops and doesn't game them up too much.

Ruta Brown
Canterbury, United Kingdom

I love seeing the diversity on *Game Informer*'s covers over the last few months. Miles Morales without his Spider-Man mask was a great idea, and having Colt front and center (on what is arguably your best-designed cover) is wonderful to see. The world of games is for everyone, and I feel that when I get each issue of the magazine. Thank you!

Michael Frazer
via email

Not only is Deathloop a new series, it's a new idea designed for a new machine. I'm sick of the sequels and free-to-play garbage we get all of the time. We need more stuff like this. I hope it is a smash success and opens the door for more original ideas.

Alla Medina
via email

Deathloop is a timed PlayStation 5 exclusive, meaning it will likely head to Xbox platforms (and maybe even Switch) at a later date. That's just one of many reasons why we doubt Microsoft would sabotage its production; it's in Microsoft's interest to release the best games possible, and we have a feeling Arkane is making the game it intended to under both Bethesda and now Microsoft. From the gameplay we saw, Deathloop is shaping up quite nicely, both as an original concept and as an identifiable Arkane production.

A New Switch?

I know I shouldn't buy too much into rumors, but I like what I hear about this supposed high-end Switch, and I am seeing similar reports all over the place. With 4K capabilities and a better screen, do you think that means Switch will be getting more third-party support, namely the Call of Duty and Assassin's Creed games? I get the feeling that Nintendo is heading in that direction with this better Switch. If that is the case, how would that work? Would I just not be able to play them on my original Switch? Kinda like DS to 3DS?

Shawn Merryweather
Arcosanti, AZ

The rumors are enticing, but for now they are just rumors; Nintendo has not confirmed or denied them. If the latest scuttlebutt is true, production would begin this summer, and we'd likely get an official announcement around then.

NINTENDO
SWITCH

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Indie Games

There aren't many indie games advertising in *Game Informer*, and very few get mentioned online until a couple days or a week prior to launch. Within a few days of launch, the games are already buried in the PlayStation, Xbox, and Switch online store listings. How can these game developers possibly expect to make a profit? What do they need to do to get more media attention, and what role can *Game Informer* play in unearthing these potential indie gems to the masses?

Jim Granger
Mankato, MN

Dozens (if not hundreds) of games are released in any given week across all platforms, and it's practically impossible to cover them all. In each issue of the magazine, we do our best to dig through those stacks of games to find the ones that you should know about. Some games receive extensive marketing, others gain traction through word of mouth. The recent success of Valheim happened mostly by players telling their friends to check it out, streaming, and the press latching onto it as the next big game. Valheim has now sold over five million copies and was made by just five people.

Nintendo has always been willing to refresh a platform with new hardware options, and we've already gotten one with the Switch Lite. Given Nintendo says Switch is just halfway through its life cycle, we would not be surprised if we saw a higher-end refresh. As for the DS to 3DS comparison, those were two distinct hardware generations; if this Switch is real and billed as the rumors suggest, it wouldn't bring a new generation of gaming. That complicates what additional games could run on it. Would Nintendo allow a game like Call of Duty to just run on a better version? That's the question of the hour. While Nintendo has tried it before (with the New 3DS), fracturing a system's audience could cause more confusion than excitement.

Game Prices

The topic of game prices comes up a lot with my friends. When we see a game we want to buy in the PlayStation store, we don't know how much it will be until we click in to the product page. Sometimes we're pleased, sometimes we can't believe how expensive something is. We are also confused over what version of a big game we should get since they sometimes have three price points and different offerings. Games used to be one price, which made it easier. But the variety of prices we see now are also often in favor of the user. I've taken a chance on dozens of games that are $10 or less. Who determines the price? I assume it's the game creator, but can Microsoft say something is too expensive or too cheap?

Carlos D.
Atlanta, GA

The developer or publisher determines the game's price, though they usually follow current industry standards. We sometimes see publishers test the waters in different ways, like when Bethesda released The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion's horse armor DLC for $5. At the time, that test was criticized for being too expensive, but is now relatively cheap when stacked up against the offerings in most free-to-play games. The market and success of a game are the big factors that we see in the price. If a game launches for $60 and no one buys it, we often see the price drop quickly. For the new generation of games, we are seeing companies dabble at a higher $70 price point for the triple-A releases, but we doubt they will go much higher than that (unless it's for a special edition). In the past, Apple has cracked down on irrationally priced games on its app store. We don't know the extent of price curation that Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo do for their stores, but so far it's been mostly consistent.

New Generation Problems

After reading the last editorial on new triple-A games, I wanted to ask you: Do you think that sales of new triple-A games will be low, as there are only six million new PS5s and even fewer Xbox Series X/S systems? Plus, all triple-A games I have purchased in the last few years have been buggy, and Cyberpunk is just the tip of the iceberg. How many players are willing to buy a new game that underperforms on old consoles with the promise of a free next-gen upgrade when next-gen consoles are still expensive and scarce? I believe this will be a big problem for the next year or more, leaving developers with low sales and losses as these type games cost hundreds of millions to make.

Michael Baker
via email

All console launches start small. Launching a game on the day a new system hits carries the risk that the install base will not grow, but also has the benefit of being one of the few options available out of the gate. If a system can find success (and most do), great games are always going to sell, and should be able to recuperate costs as more people adopt the hardware. Potential day-one purchases disappearing due to the quality of the game is a different-but-related issue. Following the release of Cyberpunk 2077, we've heard an outcry from our readership that is fed up with games not working properly. The hope is that an industry-wide wakeup call was established after Cyberpunk. We'll have to wait to see if that's the case in the months ahead.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I read the article in the last issue about the Monster Hunter movie, so I decided to watch it. It's awesome!"

Many of us also enjoyed it. While being a major departure from the games, the Monster Hunter movie impresses with its visual effects and battles.

"If you could play a mission in real life from any video game without dying, which one would you choose?"

The Meat Circus from Psychonauts because it sounds (and probably smells) delicious!

"Me and my brother somehow managed to preorder a PS5, and we got it mailed to us on launch day. One word: magical! Everything about this system screams next gen. We had a blast that first weekend and can't wait for more. Nothing on Earth is like launch day."

Taking new technology for a test drive is always fun, especially when it delivers in a big way like PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X do. To your waiting comment, the lack of new games is the only downfall so far.

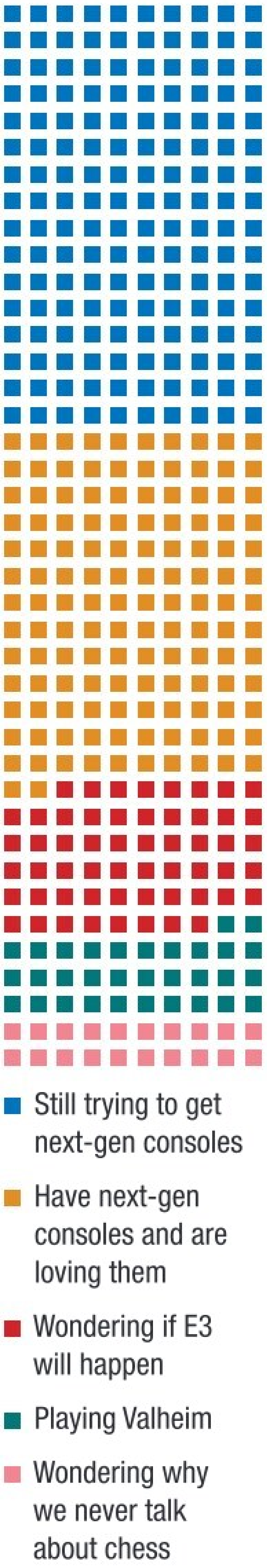
Best Advice:

"Stay away from him. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Question Of The Month:

What game do you want to see get announced for next-generation machines?

On Your Mind



Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers for their current take on microtransactions. Their answers were all over the map …

Like most people, I was wary of them when they first started, and hated how they resembled gambling for a while, but now they are just a part of the video game ecosystem. If done right, I don't mind them as they are just optional. If done wrong, I consider never buying a game from that developer again, as my trust is gone.

Robyn Mika
Seattle, WA

The entire concept of free-to-play gaming is corrupt to the core. Most of the games could be great, but are ruined by how the microtransactions are inserted into them. It's sad to see, and even sadder knowing most people have no issues with how they take advantage of you and your wallet.

Chris Nahin
via email

I only use them when I feel the value is right. I view them like anything else I buy. Would I buy a $100 banana in real life? No. Should I do it in a game? The answer is the same. Just look at them individually. Microtransactions are here to stay, just like grocery shopping. Learn to live with them and figure out how they fit into your life.

Becca Ferrero
San Antonio, TX

Animal Crossing

I felt like I could have written everything Andrew Reiner wrote in his opinion piece on returning to Animal Crossing after an extended time away from the game. Returning to the game after a long time, due to "real life" only to have roaches in my house, and to get berated by my fellow islanders for being gone so long definitely put a damper on my return. Animal Crossing made me realize I prefer games that don't punish me for having a life outside of them.

R. Edwards
Texas

Even games like Fortnite and Call of Duty make you feel guilty for time away. Not with words, but with a timer that is constantly ticking down on the Battle Pass. If you don't spend enough time in the game, you're going to miss out on unlocks. It adds an element of stress and pressure to games that are meant to be fun. Battle Passes are still much better than loot crates, but we still need a new solution that doesn't feel like its preying on our time in addition to our money.

Medieval Mario

I wish Nintendo would put Mario in a true medieval setting – swords, armor, and all! Before you say no to that idea, hear me out. I don't mean they should go all *Game of Thrones* dark and serious; just make one entry where Mario's able to mount Yoshi and ride across an open Mushroom Kingdom, battling Lord Bowser and his army to save Princess Peach. I know the Legend of Zelda franchise is supposed to scratch that itch. However, Mario is still king!

O.G. (Original Gamer)
Las Vegas, NV

Pokémon Legends: Arceus is a new game that appears to draw heavy inspiration from The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild's freeing open-world design (see page 64). Why can't Mario follow suit? We'd love to see what a truly open-world Mario adventure would look like. (Have you checked out Bowser's Fury?) As for the medieval angle, we like where your head is at, but Sonic has soured our memories by doing the same thing in the King Arthur-themed game, Sonic and the Black Knight.

WINNER

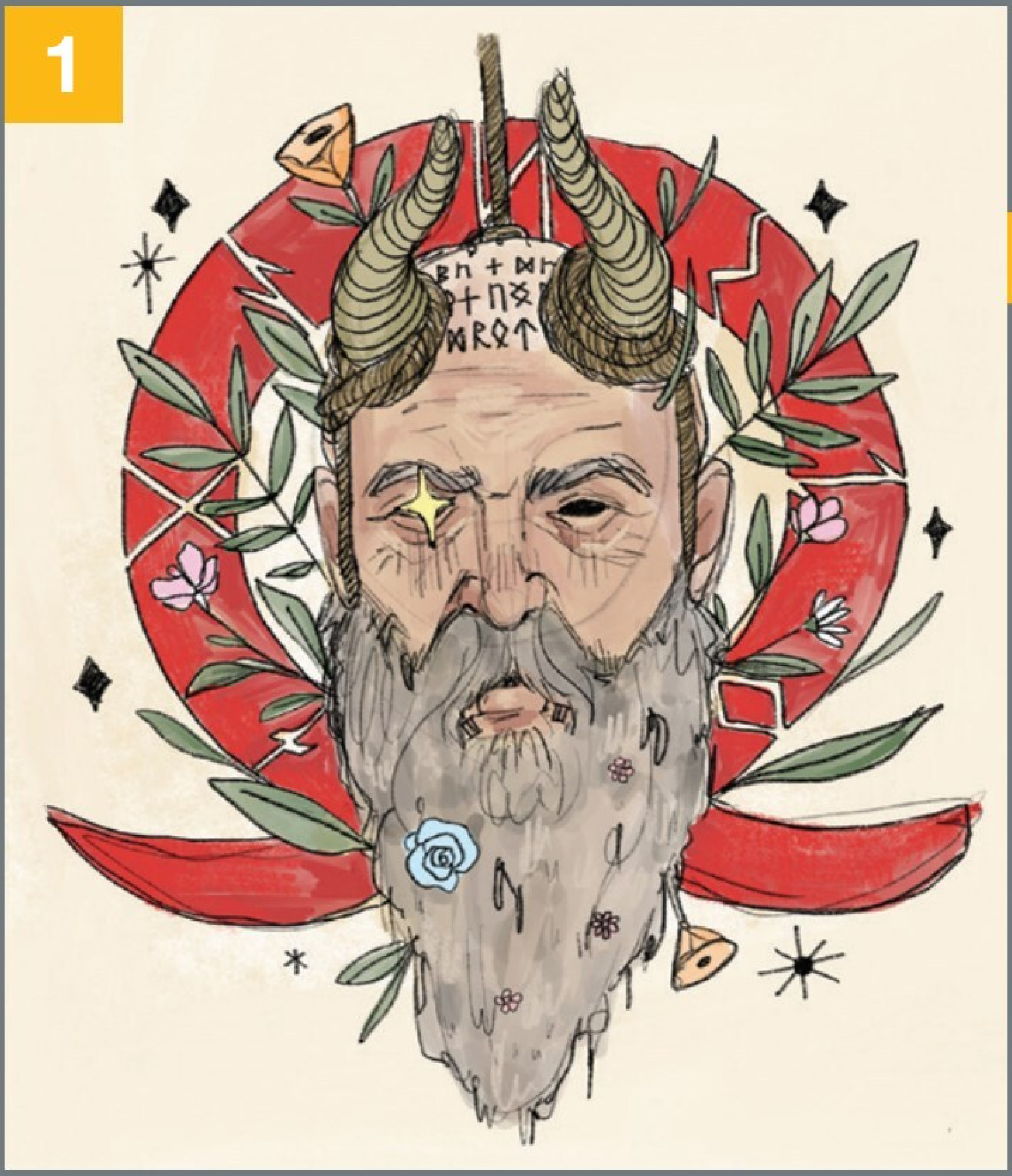
1 Jessie Hannah
Everyone was a bit surprised that Mimir made the cut for the newest face on the twenty-dollar bill.

2 Kahlan Fuhrer
Tina's explosive was impressive, but unfortunately it also knocked out all her color.

3 Taylor VanMalsen
Don't worry – they all got their second shots before attending this year's company picnic.

4 Mason Maritt, Age 12
It's all smiles until someone gets knocked off the edge into a bottomless pit.

5 Massimo Matos, Age 8
Pikachu to the rescue?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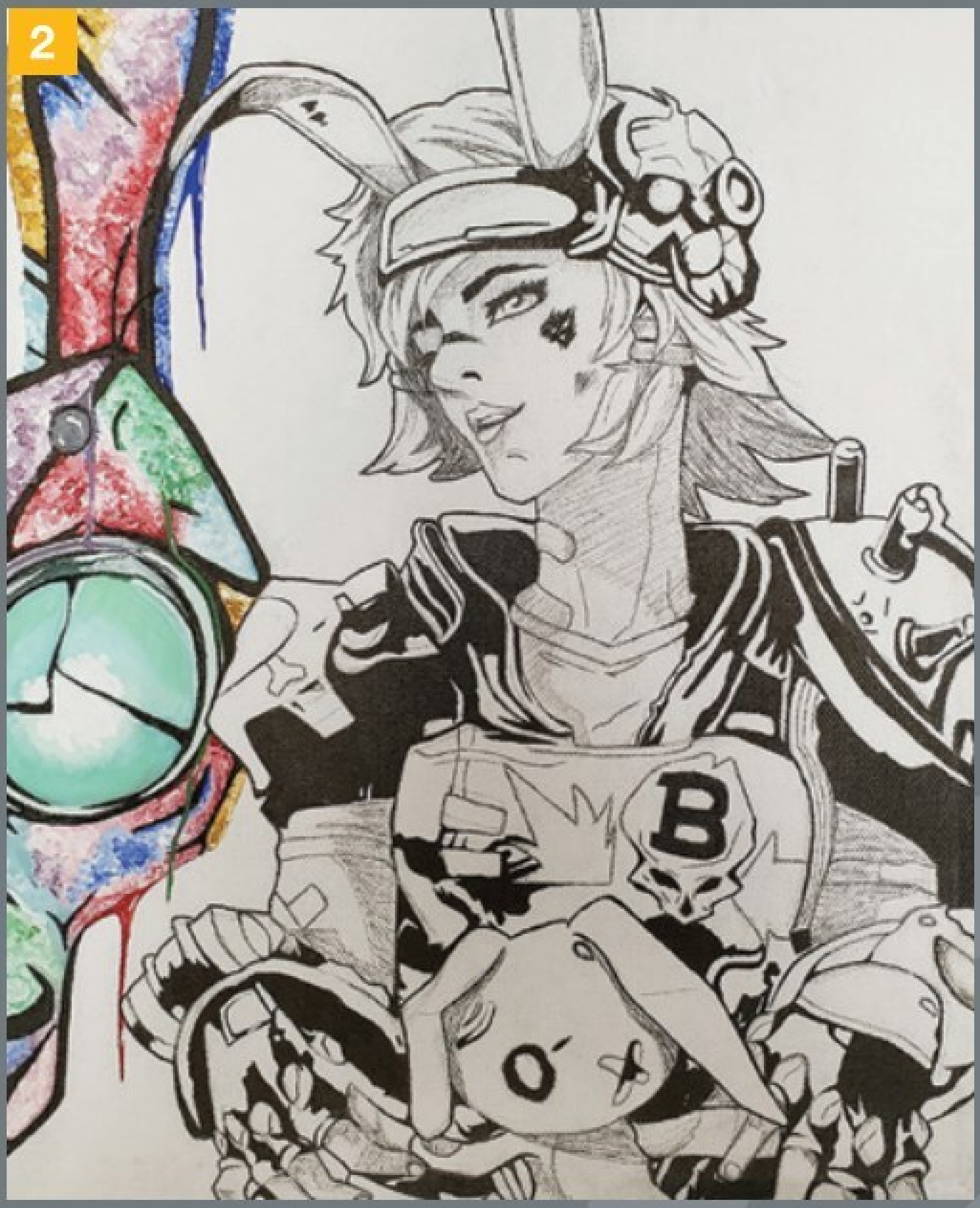
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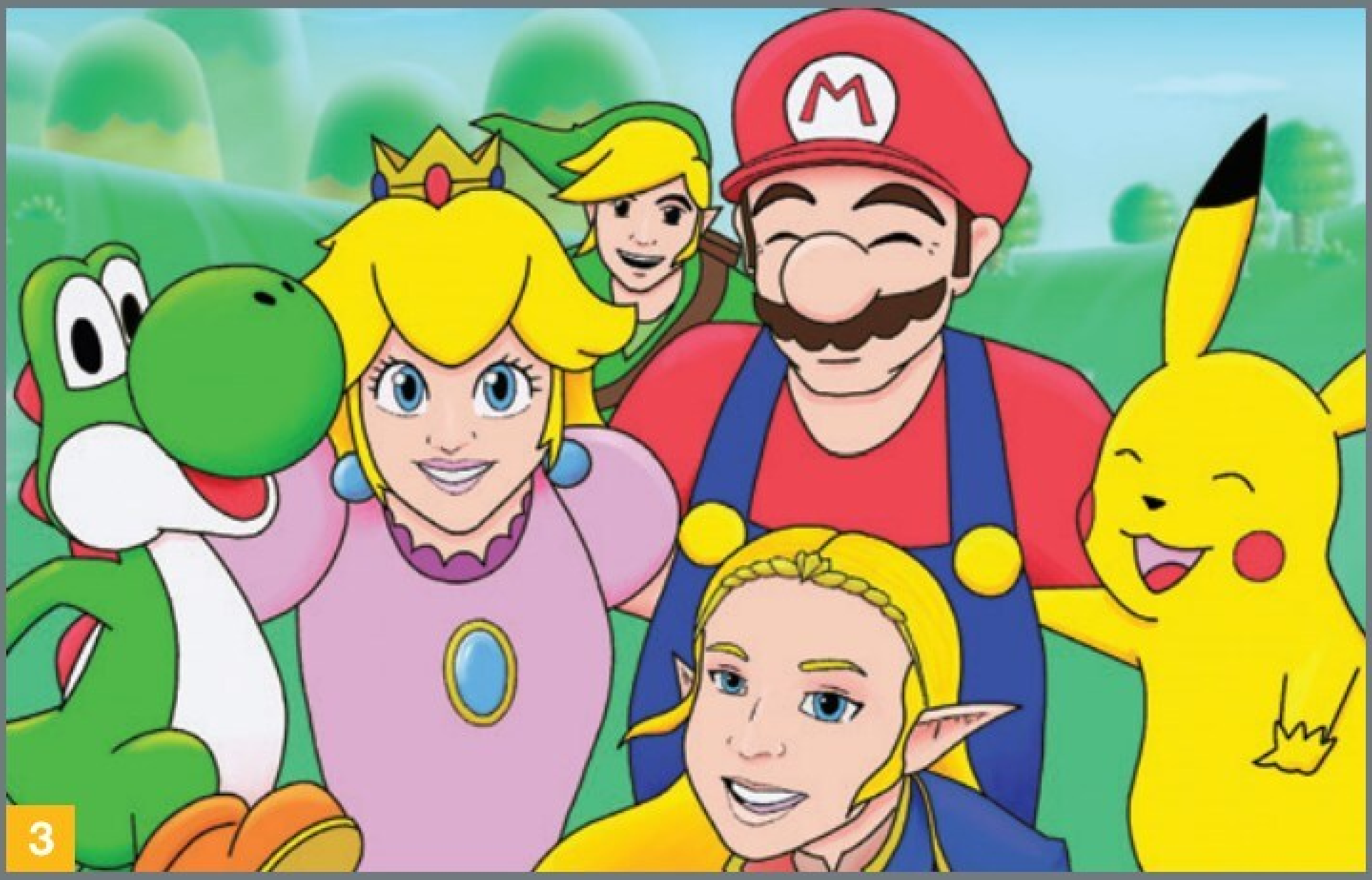
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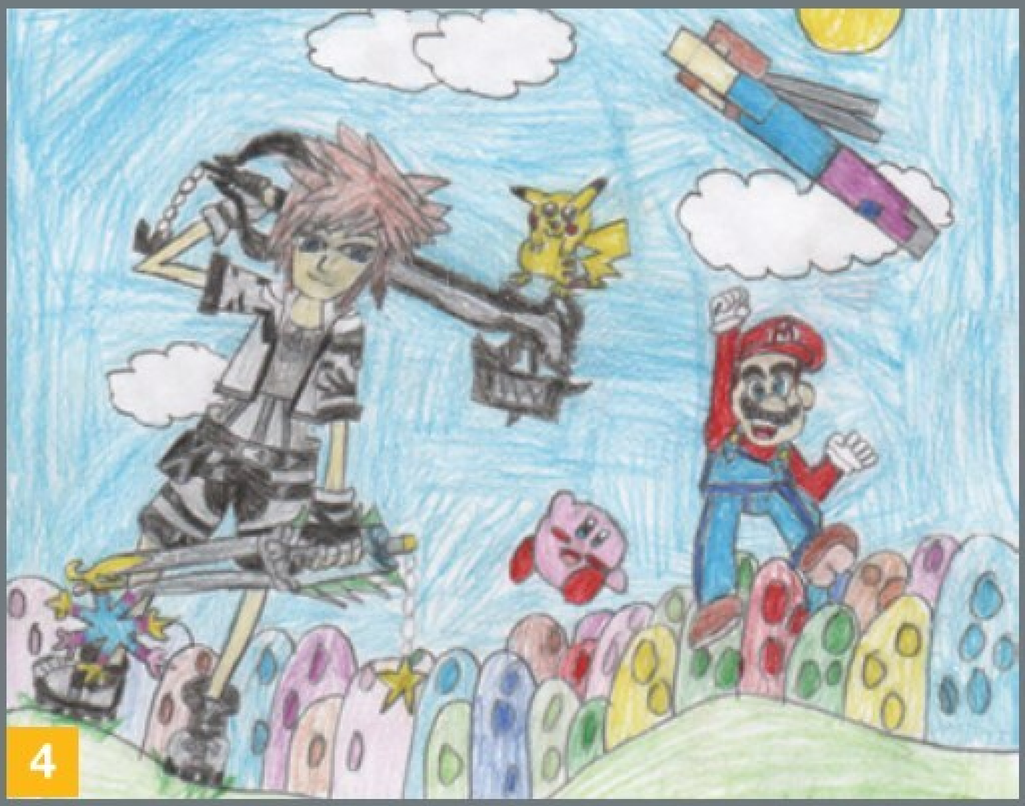
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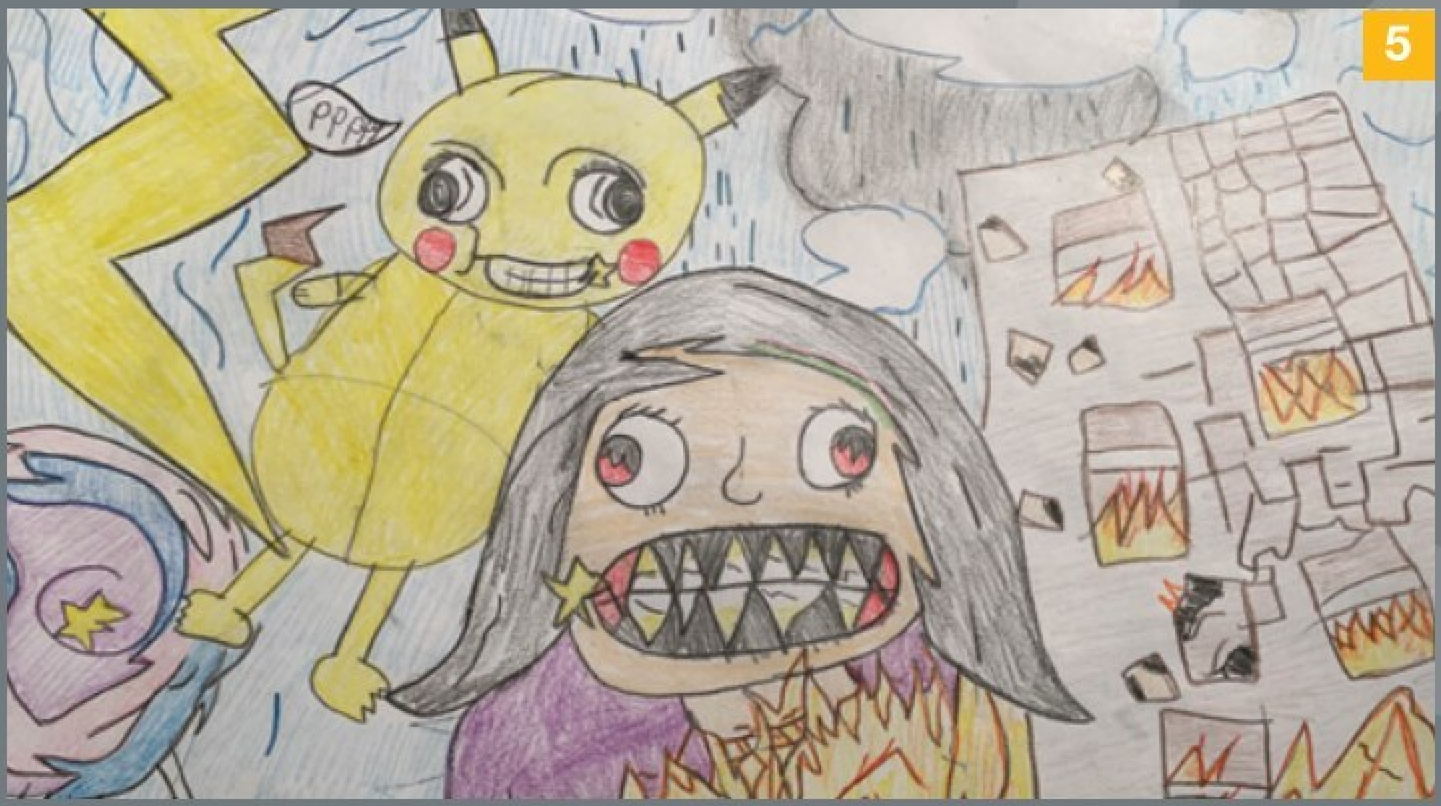
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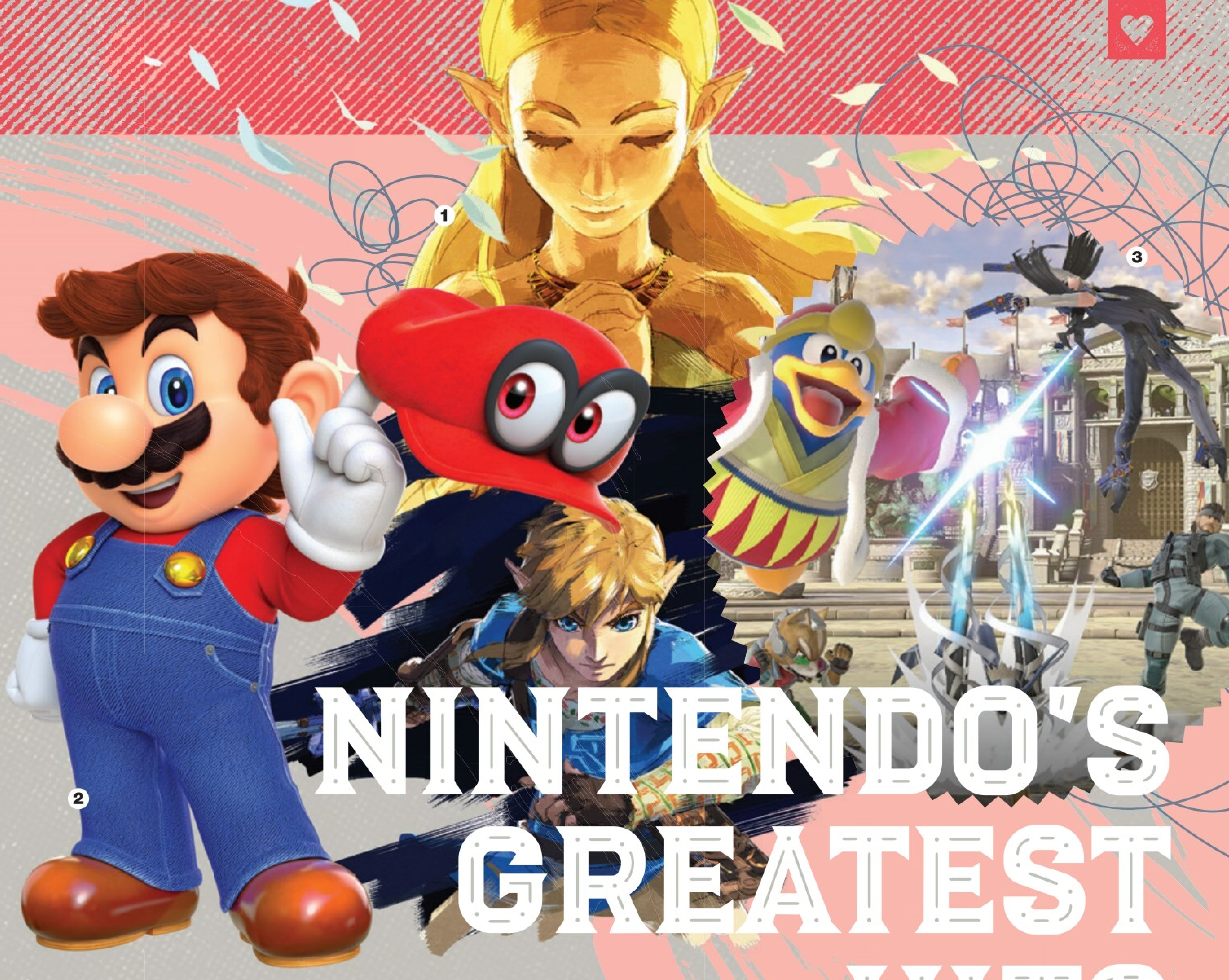
Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

THE BEST OF SWITCH

The Switch has become one of Nintendo's most popular consoles, capturing a wide audience of all ages who enjoy gaming at home and on-the-go. Halfway into its lifecycle, this juggernaut system shows no signs of slowing down, with exciting releases like Splatoon 3 and Pokémon Legends: Arceus on the horizon. As its user base expands, more people than ever are looking for the best games to play on the Switch. As a staff, we sat down and compiled a slew of categories to appeal to different types of gamers and picked our top three games in those fields. Each game only appears once for variety's sake, and our three-game limit required some tough cuts. Throughout the next few pages, you'll find a diverse list that *Game Informer* considers the console's best offerings, with titles representing a multitude of genres, experiences, and developers.

by Game Informer Staff



NINTENDO'S GREATEST HITS

Ever since the Switch's launch in 2017, several can't-miss games have come to the platform. While we will highlight many of those throughout this article, we wanted to kick things off with the undeniable essentials of the platform – the games you tell people to drop everything and go play if they haven't. These are the titles that epitomize the Nintendo Switch as a platform, and are often the reasons people buy one in the first place.

When you talk about experiences that define the Switch, no game comes to mind faster than **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**. Instilling the same sense of wonder gamers felt when they first set out in Ocarina of Time, gliding off the Great Plateau and getting a bird's-eye view of Breath of the Wild's seemingly endless possibilities is unparalleled by most other games. Best of all, the journey delivers on that promise, feeding you amazing surprises around every corner, alongside a steady drip of satisfying puzzles and combat encounters to satiate traditional Zelda fans.

Much like Breath of the Wild, **Super Mario Odyssey** builds upon the successes of its N64 predecessor. By dropping Mario into the middle of big, open areas and giving him an array of tasks to complete, the Super Mario 64 DNA is evident. However, thanks to an innovative capture mechanic, which lets Mario throw his hat at enemies and objects to temporarily control them, as well as Easter eggs galore, Odyssey quickly became a standout game in the long and illustrious Super Mario franchise.

Rounding out our list of Switch essentials is perhaps the most ambitious crossover video game ever made. **Super Smash Bros. Ultimate** lives up to the name by not only including every character in the series' history, but also by delivering the widest feature set, soundtrack, and post-launch DLC plan for the crossover fighter. After all, where else can you watch Mario and Sonic punch each other while Sephiroth and Pac-Man trade Poké Balls inside Persona 5's Mementos? Add terrific fighting mechanics and a unique single-player story mode that uses various gameplay modifiers, and you have the most complete package a fan could hope for.

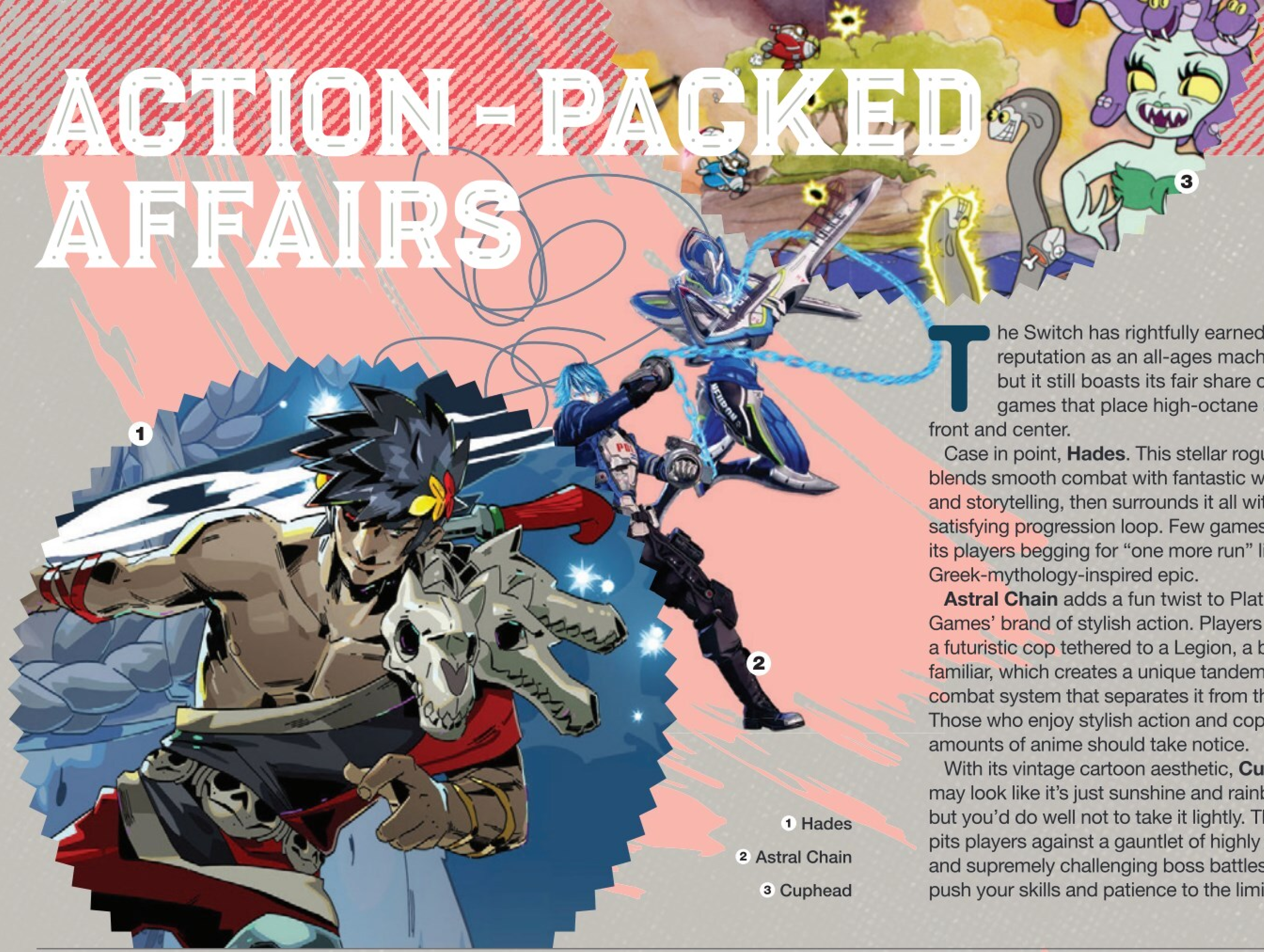
Of course, these games are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to games you should play on Switch. Read on to see what else we here at *Game Informer* recommend you check out on Nintendo's wildly successful hybrid console.

1 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

2 Super Mario Odyssey

3 Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

ACTION-PACKED AFFAIRS



1 Hades

2 Astral Chain

3 Cuphead

The Switch has rightfully earned its reputation as an all-ages machine, but it still boasts its fair share of games that place high-octane action front and center.

Case in point, **Hades**. This stellar roguelite blends smooth combat with fantastic writing and storytelling, then surrounds it all with a satisfying progression loop. Few games have its players begging for "one more run" like this Greek-mythology-inspired epic.

Astral Chain adds a fun twist to PlatinumGames' brand of stylish action. Players control a futuristic cop tethered to a Legion, a beast-like familiar, which creates a unique tandem-based combat system that separates it from the pack. Those who enjoy stylish action and copious amounts of anime should take notice.

With its vintage cartoon aesthetic, **Cuphead** may look like it's just sunshine and rainbows, but you'd do well not to take it lightly. The game pits players against a gauntlet of highly creative and supremely challenging boss battles that will push your skills and patience to the limit.

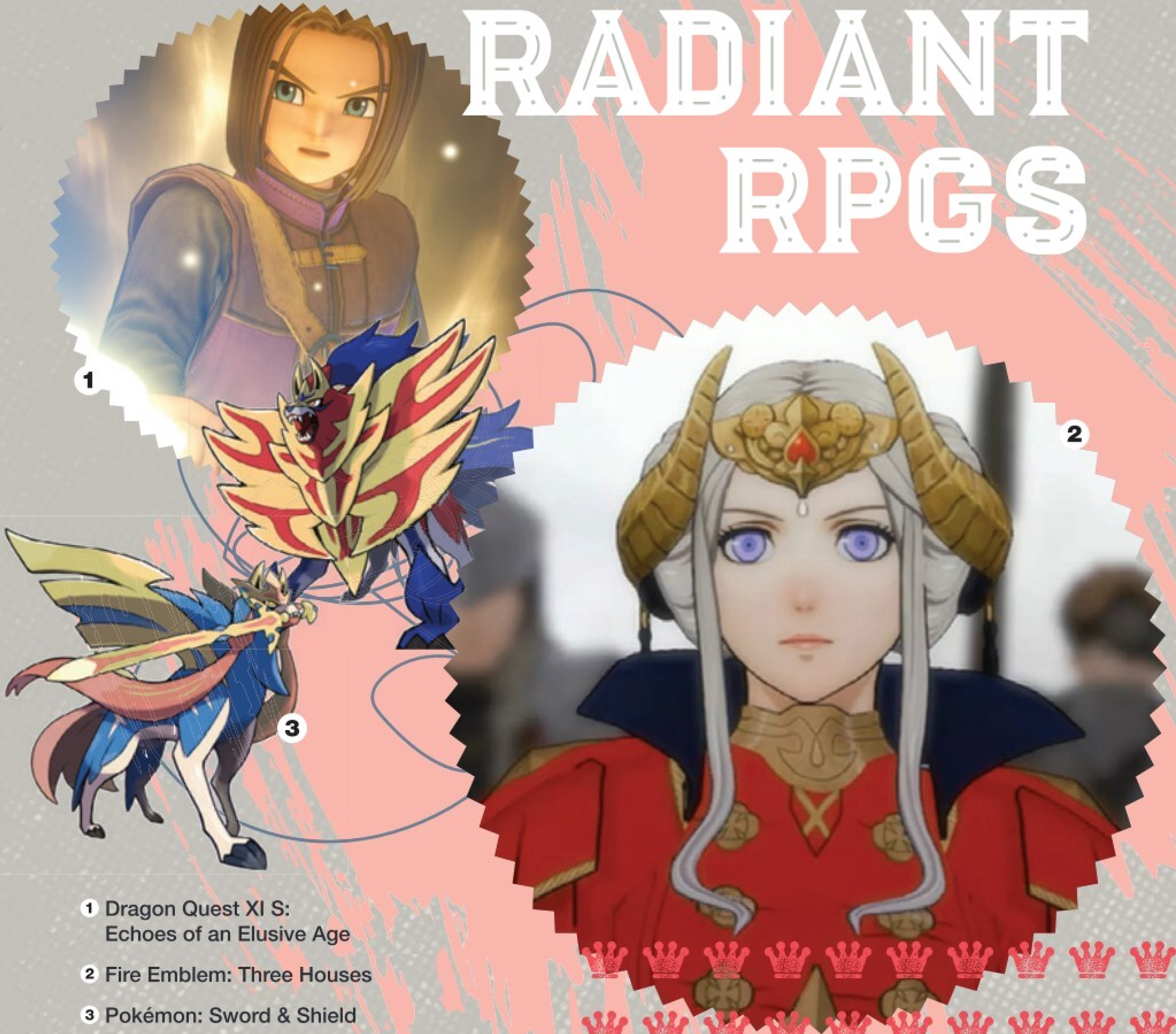
RADIANT RPGS

If you want access to an amazing range of role-playing experiences, from the essential to the eccentric, the Switch has you covered.

People often ask, "What game should I check out to get into JRPGs?" The answer to that question is **Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age.** The latest entry in the long-running series masterfully packages modern sensibilities with the tradition of old-school JRPGs. And the Switch is is a great place to play it, thanks to a 2D retro mode you can swap between on the fly that lets you take the turn-based journey in 16-bit fashion. It also houses several quality-of-life improvements, party member quests, and a photo mode.

Looking for some strategy? It's hard to find a better example of the modern SRPG than **Fire Emblem: Three Houses**. Not only are you commanding legions of troops on the battlefield, exploiting weaknesses, and building up your favorite characters, but you also assume the role of a professor who must guide young and eccentric personalities through betrayals and power struggles. And it all starts with selecting from one of three houses to guide.

Finally, **Pokémon: Sword & Shield** kicks off a new generation of monster collection, and for the first time ever, brings the new mainline experience to consoles. Creative creatures, the open Wild Area, and an intriguing story centered on the Galar League and the region's Dynamax phenomenon deliver a fun Gen 8 experience.



1 Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age

2 Fire Emblem: Three Houses

3 Pokémon: Sword & Shield

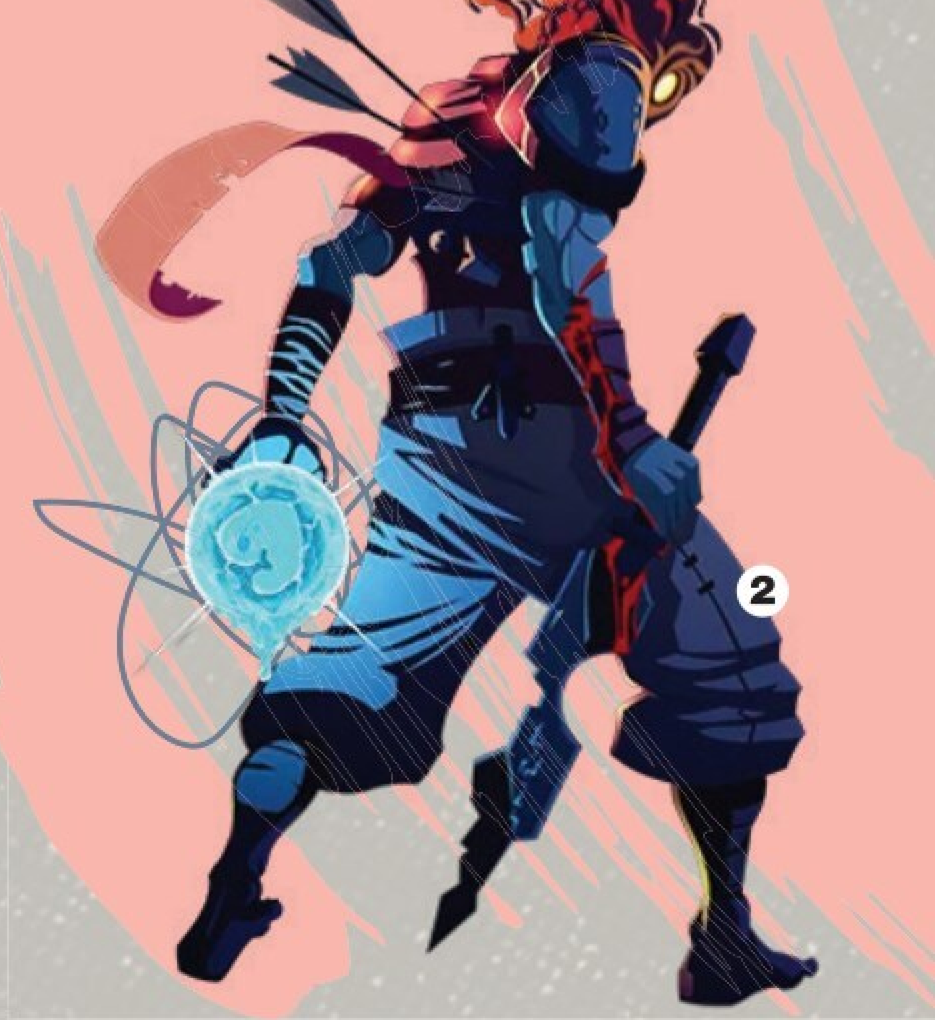
INDIE DARLINGS

Some of the best games on the Switch come from independent teams who pour their hearts into creating something special. The result often feels personal, unique, and fueled by passion, with developers who are deeply involved in the communities that play their games, responding enthusiastically and proactively to address the desires of players. The best of these indie games can equal or exceed the work of much larger studios and set the bar for whole genres.

While farming simulations have been a popular gaming niche for years, **Stardew Valley** took the milieu to a whole new level with its "country-life RPG." Filled with opportunities to live out the fantasy of a pastoral experience, the simple joys of ConcernedApe's sprawling game can translate into hundreds of hours of playtime. From raising crops to raising a family, it's an idyllic and rewarding adventure that proves games can transport us into entirely different lives.

By borrowing liberally from the exploration and secrets of Castlevania alongside the challenging combat and permadeath of the roguelike formula, **Dead Cells** emerges with an identity all its own, showcasing a blend of high challenge, evocative environments, and incredibly intense 2D action. The procedurally generated levels ensure unique playthroughs every time you dive into the adventure, but the smart layout and steady knowledge growth helps players slowly chip away at the mysteries and manifold enemies that wait in the dark corners of Motion Twin's massive game. It may be hard, but it's never boring.

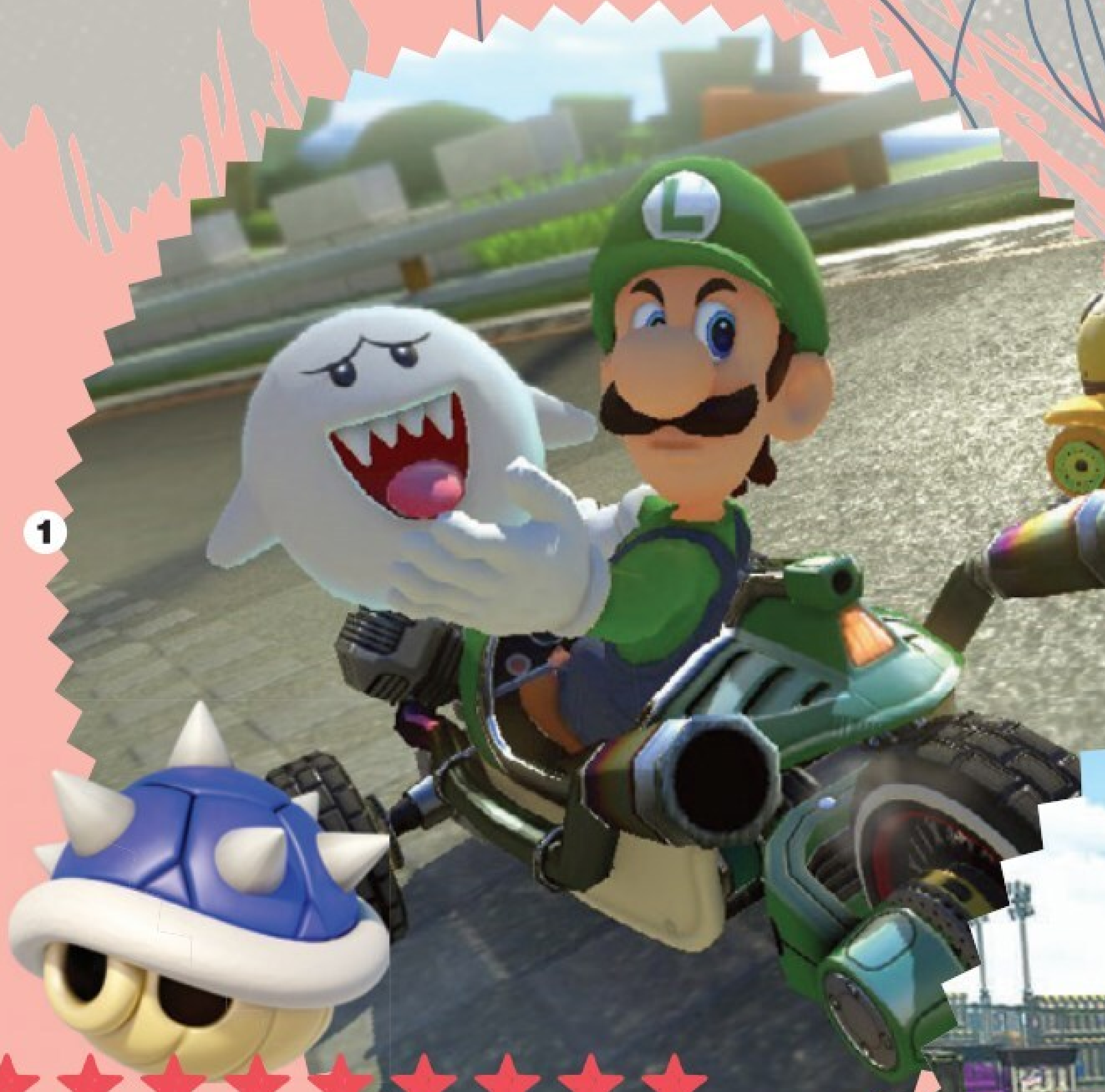
Playing as a bug who explores an underground kingdom of other bugs, it would be easy to presume that **Hollow Knight** is a game of small scope or ambition. Instead, Team Cherry's homage to classic 2D action turns out to be an expansive journey, filled with secret upgrades, tons of unique enemies and bosses, and a haunting and memorable world that sticks with you long after the credits finally roll.

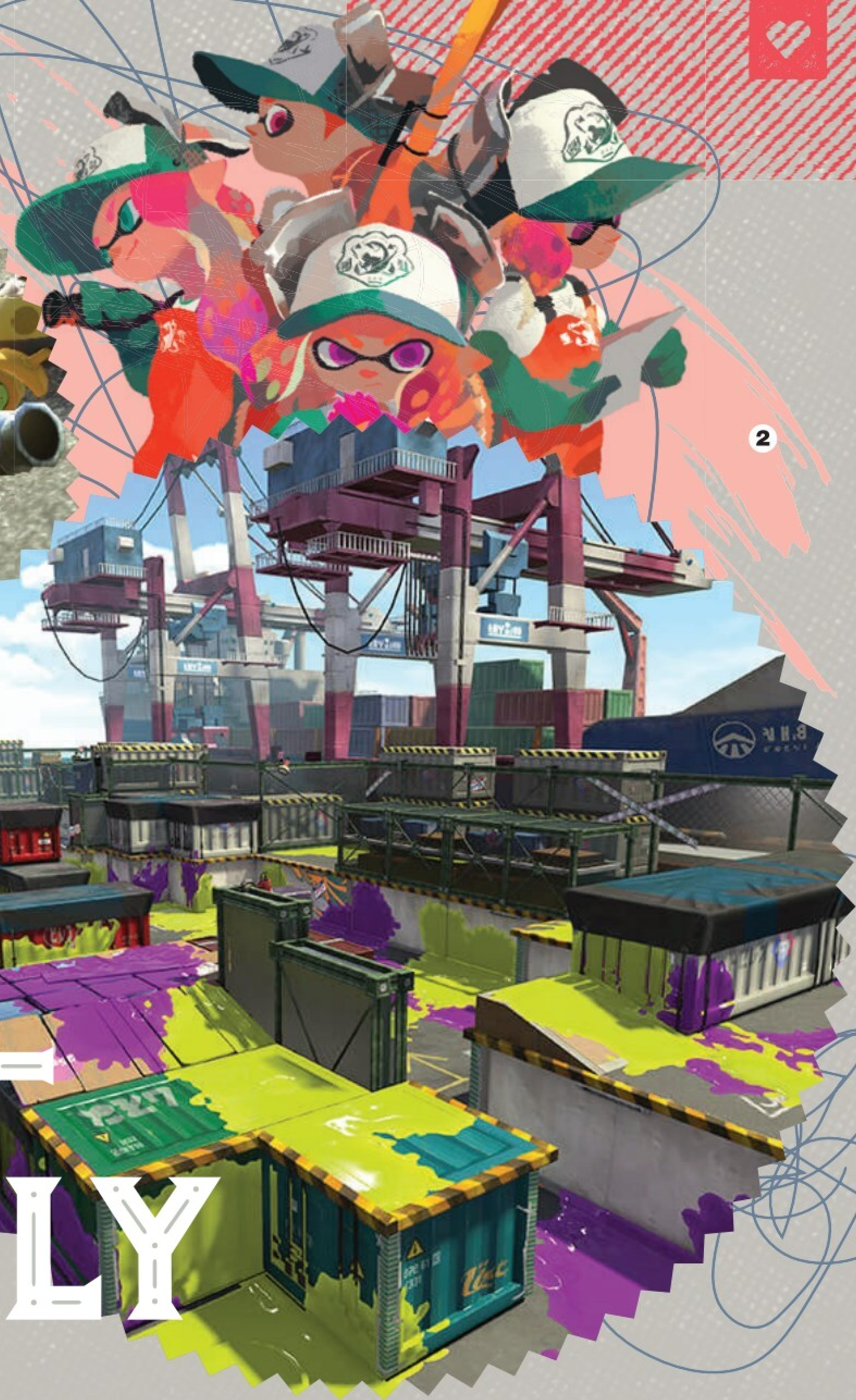


① Stardew Valley

② Dead Cells

③ Hollow Knight





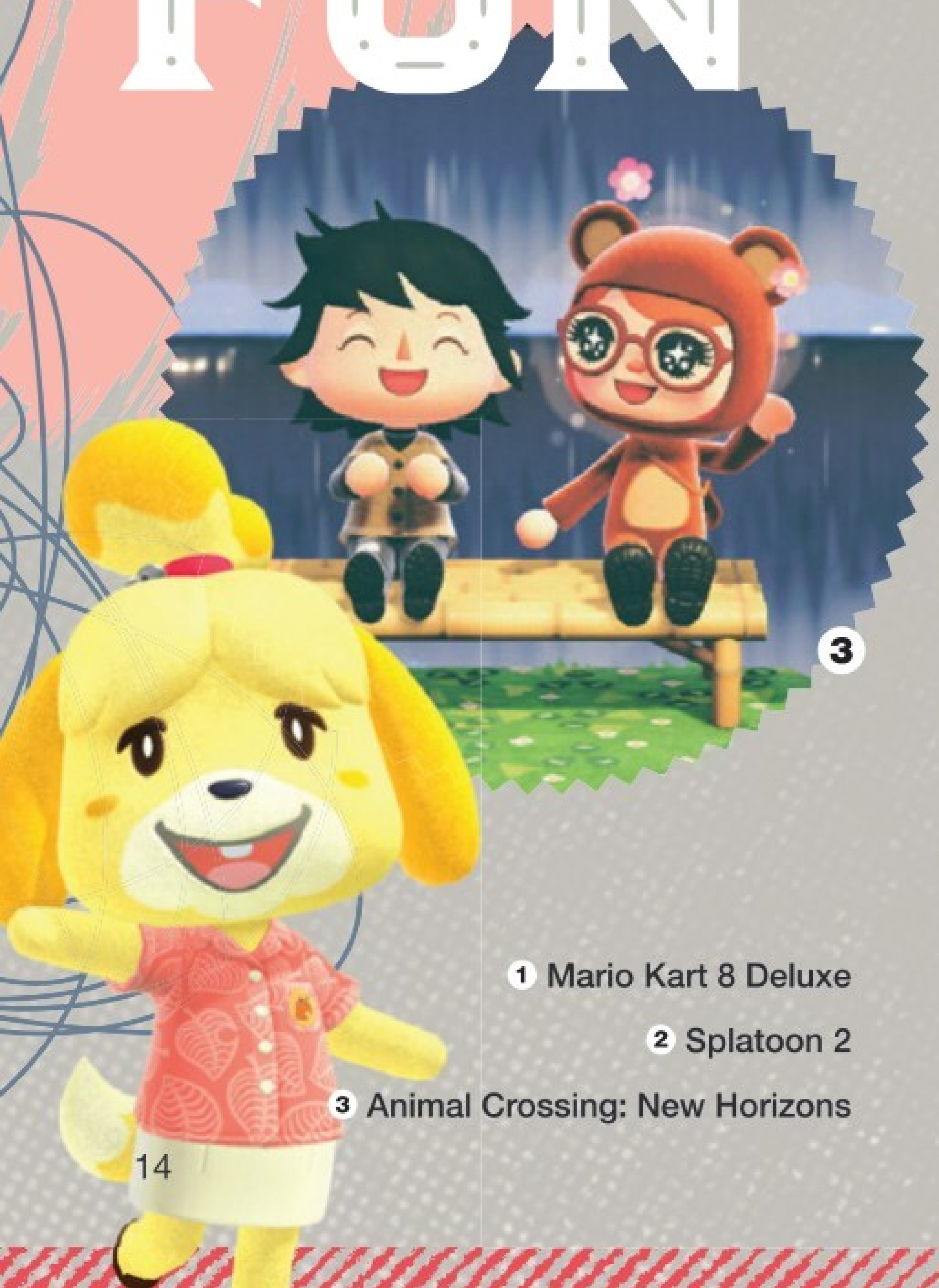
FAMILY-FRIENDLY FUN

Nintendo creates games that cater to everyone. While this may seem like something every developer should attempt to achieve, making a game equally appealing to kids and adults is a practice in which Nintendo excels. Most of its games are vibrant and upbeat, yet offer sophisticated design with unique experiences and plenty of depth to challenge and reward everyone. Mario is the shining example of this – and he's just one face on dozens of Nintendo games that deliver universal appeal.

Every Mario title technically checks the box for family-friendly fun, but the one that stands out in terms of how much joyous energy and edge-of-your-seat intensity it brings to a room full of people is **Mario Kart 8 Deluxe**. Although it was originally released on Wii U, this racer was made bigger and better on Switch, offering a massive roster of over 40 characters, a better resolution, a deeper battle mode, and a multitude of little tweaks and fixes to almost every aspect of the game. This is a competitive experience that never loses its charm, and it is the perfect reason to equip everyone in the family with a Switch.

If you don't necessarily want to battle against your family, **Splatoon 2** is a non-violent competitive shooter with outstanding cooperative play, pushing for high levels of strategizing. Dashing across arenas and spraying paint at opponents in a variety of versus modes is great fun. The game also offers intense cooperative play against bots, and a beautifully designed campaign filled with bosses galore. Splatoon 2 is loaded with unlockables that should keep you playing for months on end, up until Splatoon 3 hits the market sometime next year.

And if you don't want any action whatsoever, **Animal Crossing: New Horizons** is as charming as games come, giving you a sunny virtual world to explore and call a new home. Your family members can visit each other's islands, send gifts, and join you for a stroll on the beach and through a museum. With missions to complete and new content being added regularly, this is the best Animal Crossing has ever been.



① Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
② Splatoon 2
③ Animal Crossing: New Horizons

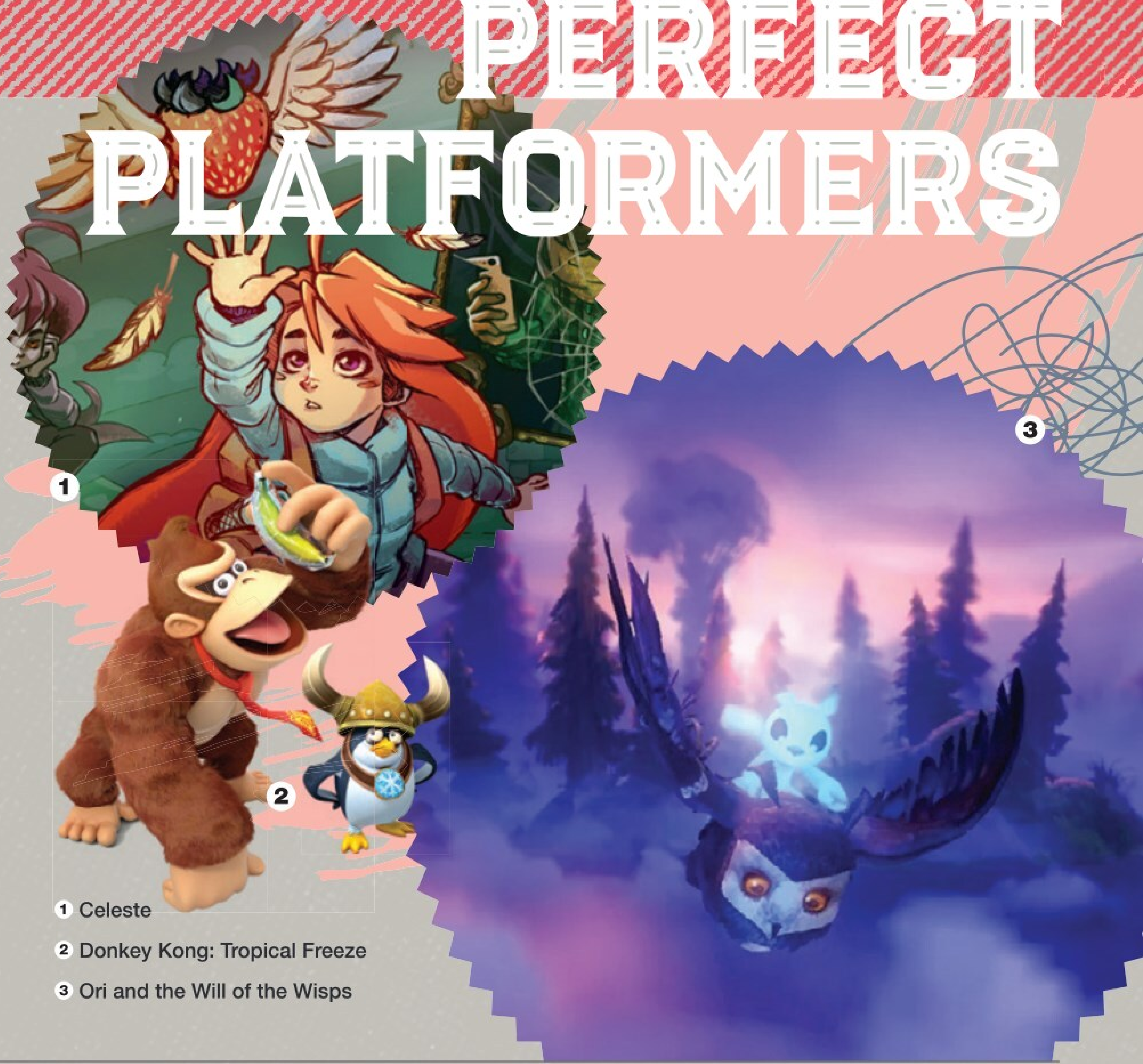
PERFECT PLATFORMERS

Nintendo systems have always been valued for including great platforming games in their libraries, and the Switch is no exception. These stellar releases offer some of the best in jumping, climbing, and other traversal, mixed with great underlying action and level design.

Celeste earns praise for its mix of old-school navigation and jumping challenges, accompanied by an entrancing narrative filled with memorable characters. Madeline's difficult climb up the mountain is platforming at its purest, but it's the mystery of what waits at the peak that keeps players respawning.

Donkey Kong: Tropical Freeze may have won our hearts in its original Wii U incarnation, but the new, easier "Funky Mode" on Switch broadens its appeal to more players while maintaining the immaculate level design, toe-tapping soundtrack, and attractive presentation that won the original its deserved praise.

Moon Studios' **Ori and the Will of the Wisps** first rocketed to success on Microsoft platforms, but its appearance on Switch, running at 60 FPS, and with all the same gorgeous art and meticulous control, makes this one of the best and most beautiful games available on Nintendo's console.



① Celeste

② Donkey Kong: Tropical Freeze

③ Ori and the Will of the Wisps

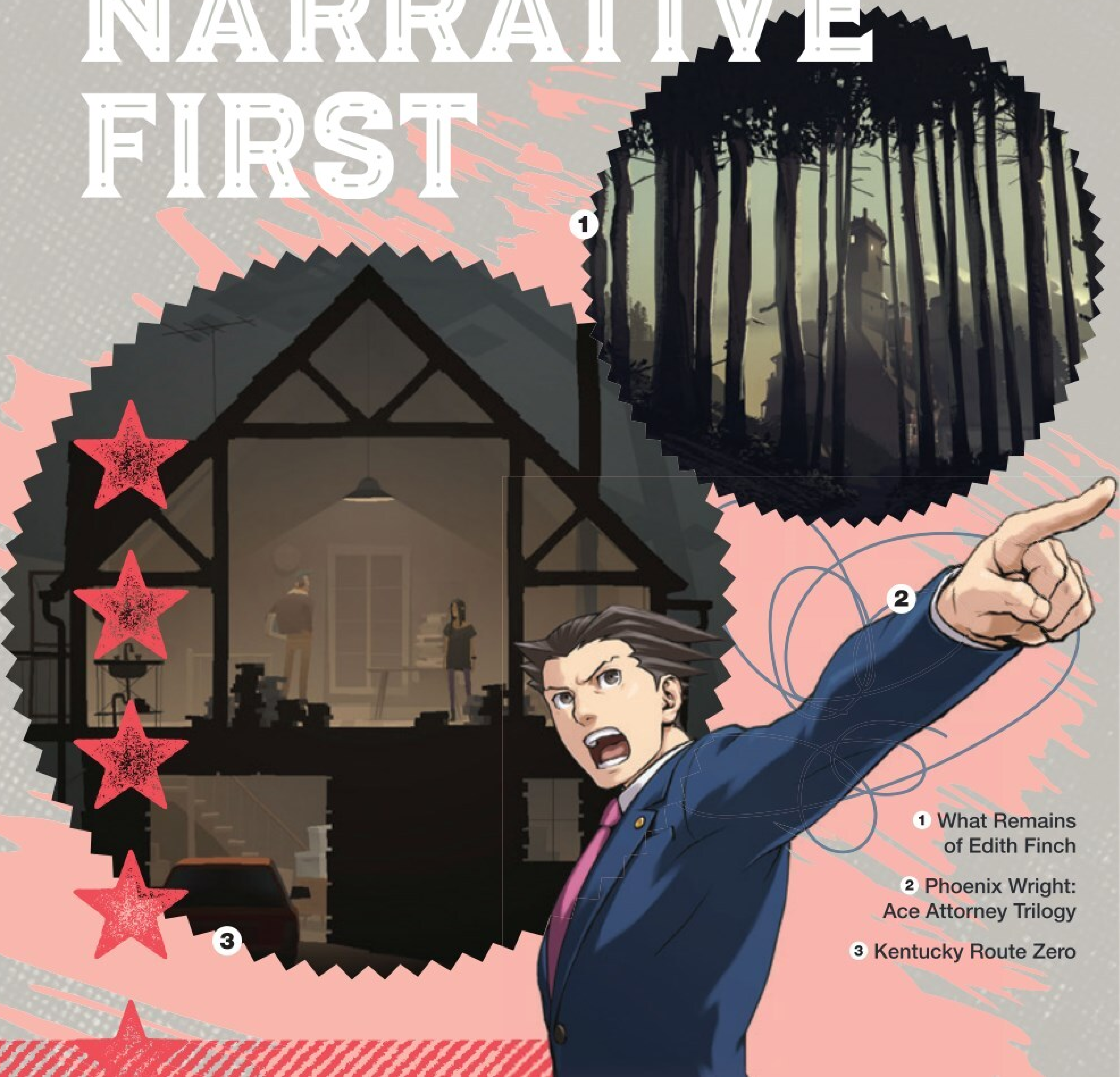
NARRATIVE FIRST

While the Switch is great for pick-up-and-play games, it's also a fantastic way to experience some of the best stories in gaming.

Giant Sparrow's **What Remains of Edith Finch** stands out as a rare example of a game tackling grief, loss, and memory in bold and mature ways. Follow Edith as she visits her family's home and recounts how members of each generation died, with each person's tragedy unfolding through an individual vignette. What Remains invites players to reflect on how we cope with death, what it means to carry a family name, and the memories we leave behind.

On the opposite side of the fence is **Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy**, which combines the first three games into one HD package. Full of memorable and lovable characters, silly humor, and intractable court trials full of unexpected revelations, this package will keep you engaged for dozens of hours.

Lastly, **Kentucky Route Zero** takes you on a journey. While visually the game is often centered around its spiritual realism, the true-to-life stories it tells about growing up and living in Kentucky are remarkably intimate and heartbreaking. From how debt affects communities, what addiction does to people, and how labor robs us of individualism, KRZ can be a bleak yet beautiful look at an often-forgotten state.

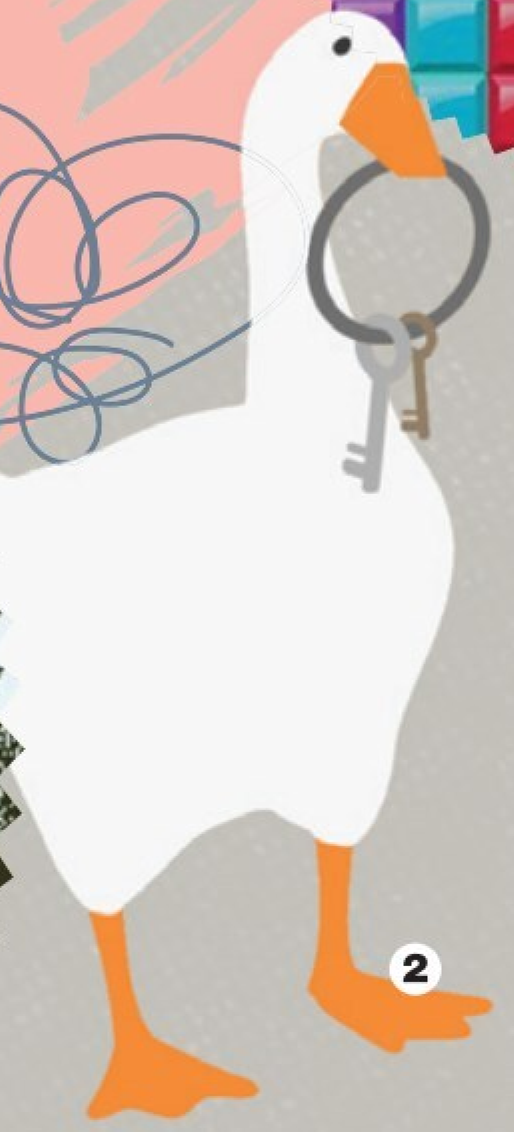


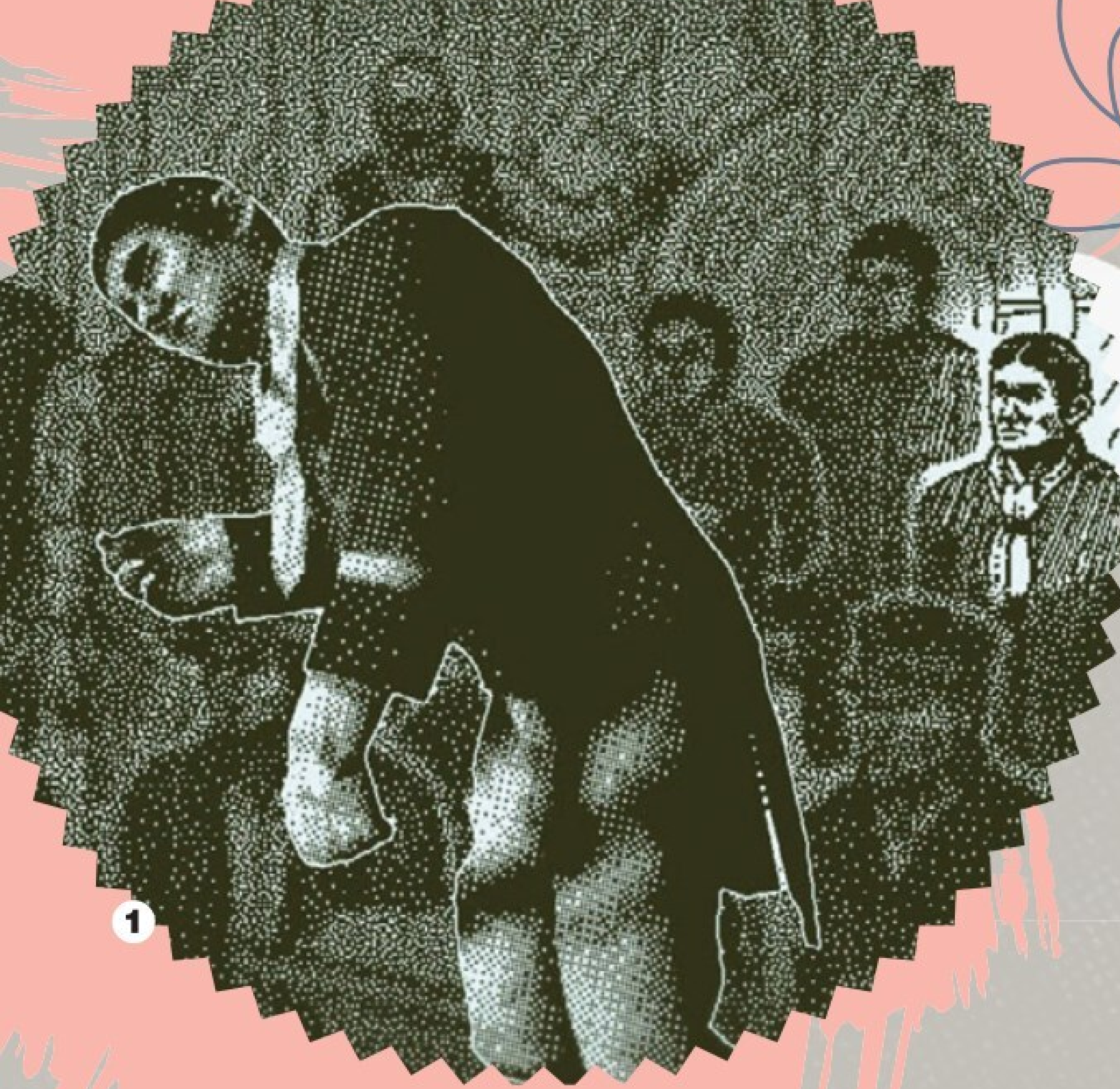
① What Remains of Edith Finch

② Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy

③ Kentucky Route Zero

PERPLEXING PUZZLES





① Return of the Obra Dinn

② Untitled Goose Game

③ Tetris 99

Don't let anyone tell you video games are mindless entertainment, because the Switch has plenty of great titles that exercise your brain instead of your trigger finger. These games are guaranteed to raise your IQ score – or at least make you feel smarter.

In **Return of the Obra Dinn**, your job is to examine frozen moments from the past to discover what horrors a derelict vessel encountered at sea. You piece together the crew's grim fate by finding clever clues and making logical leaps to account for every person on the ship's manifest.

Pestering villagers and stealing items as a mischievous bird may sound like pure chaos, but there is method to the madness in **Untitled Goose Game**. The hilarious avian antics are all wrapped up in fun scenarios that involve close observation, careful timing, and lots of honking.

Tetris 99 puts a new spin on a puzzle classic, combining the familiar block-dropping formula with a battle royale structure. Competitive Tetris is already intense, but 99-person online matches bring the frantic strategy to a whole new level.

CREATIVE CO-OP

Diving into new adventures is always fun, but sometimes it's even better with a friend. For those looking to take on a new game with a bud, there are a few co-op titles that stick out above the rest.

Overcooked 2 is a charming cooking simulation that blends strategy and total chaos into one seamless experience. From moving platforms to fun recipes, this arcade culinary experience is an enjoyable ride solo, but infinitely better with a kitchen partner.

Where Overcooked 2 is rooted in humor, **Spiritfarer** offers a completely different kind of story. With its mellow soundtrack and emotionally detailed characters, you guide lost spirits to their place in the afterlife. Playing with a friend in couch co-op helps speed up the game's management aspects, but the true appeal is in how the narrative handles the conversation of death delicately and thoughtfully.

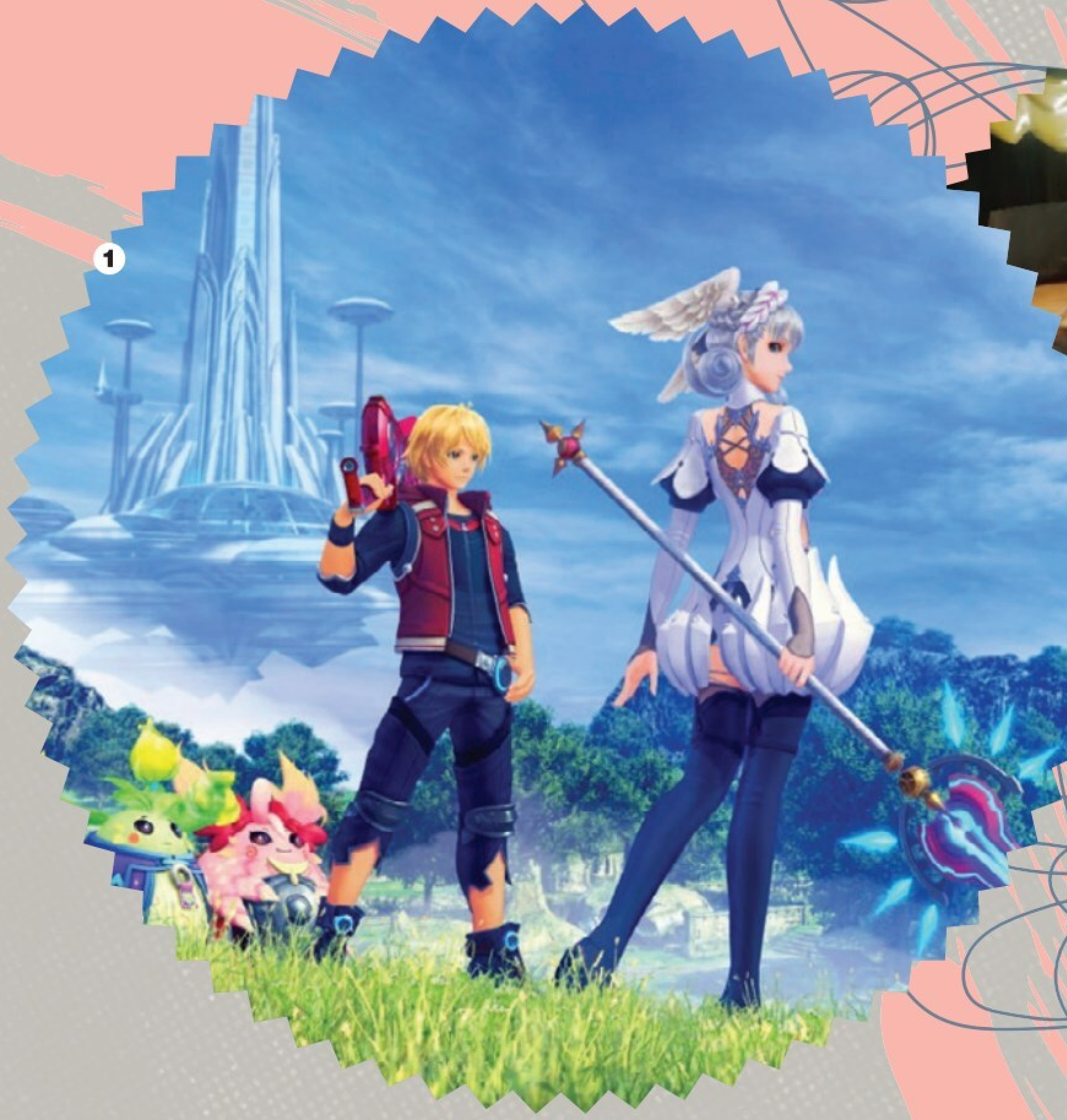
Luigi may be treated like the lesser brother in some games, but in **Luigi's Mansion 3**, he's the hero. For those looking for satisfying puzzles and fun gadgets to play with, this game has comedic depths and intricate puzzles that are worth exploring. Plus, you can play as Gooigi, a gooey version of the man himself. What more could you want?

① Overcooked 2

② Spiritfarer

③ Luigi's Mansion 3

MADE NEW AGAIN



"That would be great on Switch" has become a common refrain, thanks in no small part to the console's portable form factor. Couple that with the continuing trend of looking back on gaming history, and you have one of the most convenient places to revisit some of the classics – or to experience them for the first time. While many games have remained faithful in the transition, a few standout releases take full advantage of the Switch and the power it has over earlier hardware.

Monolith Soft hit paydirt with its Wii game Xenoblade Chronicles, but its limited production run made it difficult to track down a copy of the RPG even back in 2012. **Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition** not only makes a modern classic easier to access, but gives players plenty of reasons to revisit it in the first place. The graphics and textures feature crisp upgrades, and enhancements extend to the menu navigation and overall UI as well. The definitive edition also adds an all-new epilogue story that further explores what Shulk and company got up to a year after saving the world from a colossal threat.

The Legend of Zelda series has a passionate fanbase, with equally vocal advocates for which one is the so-called best. One of the most fondly recalled entries appeared on Nintendo's first handheld console, the Game Boy, before getting a wonderful new life on Switch. **The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening** is a complete remake of the Game Boy original that also retains its charm. A wonderful depth-of-field effect makes it look as though you're peering into a diorama of Koholint Island, and the chibi characters are a delight. It's also home to some of the best dungeon design in the old-school Zelda format.

The Wii U wasn't a hit with players, despite being home to some memorable games. Fortunately, Nintendo decided to give a relatively forgotten Mario game a chance to shine with **Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury**. The original introduced players to cat transformations and a host of other memorable new forms. The best part of the Switch remaster comes via Bowser's Fury, an all-new companion adventure in the style of Super Mario Odyssey – including battles against the fearsome Fury Bowser. ◆

1 Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition

2 The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening

3 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

SUPERGIANT AMBITION

Inside the indie studio's journey from Bastion to Hades

Hades

Supergiant Games has found a recipe for success, even if the humble and talented team would ascribe its achievements to luck. The studio behind Bastion, Transistor, Pyre, and the ultra-successful Hades has a stellar track record, earning a reputation for its fusion of world-building, music, art, and gameplay.

Supergiant's projects are all starkly different, but they evoke a shared identity in their artistic, musical, and narrative ideas about the human condition. As the studio's principal voice actor Logan Cunningham puts it: "It's just magic – a cosmic sort of serendipity." This thrilling creative combination compelled us to explore the studio and its unconventional path to greatness. We quickly discovered that Supergiant Games is a reflection of its people – friends who bring out the best in one another.

by Kimberley Wallace

TALENTED FRIENDS

Sometimes the stars align, bringing us together with the right people at the right time. When Supergiant co-founder and studio director Amir Rao took a job at Electronic Arts, it led him to meeting two key players on the Supergiant Games roster: Gavin Simon and Greg Kasavin. The trio worked together on the Command & Conquer franchise, quickly forming close friendships.

Around 2008, they all were playing games like World of Goo, Braid, Castle Crashers, and Plants vs. Zombies. "It was really inspiring," says creative director Greg Kasavin. "These games were made by just a handful of people, but they're really well-crafted and just more interesting in a lot of ways than what was happening then in the big triple-A space. That's when we started thinking, 'What would we do if we could ever do something like this?'"

As ideas percolated, Rao turned to his dad for guidance. "My dad was encouraging me to start a company as well, because he felt I was young enough that if it didn't work out, I could always try to find a job again," he says. "And so, he let us work out of his house and we formed Supergiant Games in 2009."

Their primary office? The living room, which is where they made the entirety of Bastion, Supergiant's debut game. Both Rao and Simon quit their jobs at EA and got to work, officially becoming co-founders of Supergiant Games. "I didn't really even sit down and think about or weigh the pros and cons about, 'Is this a good idea or not?," says development director Gavin Simon. "It's just like, 'This is what's going to happen and I've no idea how it will go.' [Making my own game] is just what I always wanted to do."

The duo soon recruited their third member through another friend connection. Alex Ahad, best known for his work on Skullgirls, knew Rao's best friend from high school. When Rao said they were looking for an artist, Ahad thought of his Gaia Online co-worker Jen Zee.

Before landing as Supergiant's art director, Zee came on as a three-month contractor while she continued her day job. "The first thing she drew was the Bastion," Rao recalls. "And it was so good that we immediately asked if she would quit her job and join us." Zee knew it was a risk, but she was willing to take it. "We all know the statistics around the failures of startups," Zee says. "I was young and didn't have children. I remember calling my dad and he said, 'You don't really have a lot to lose right now.'"

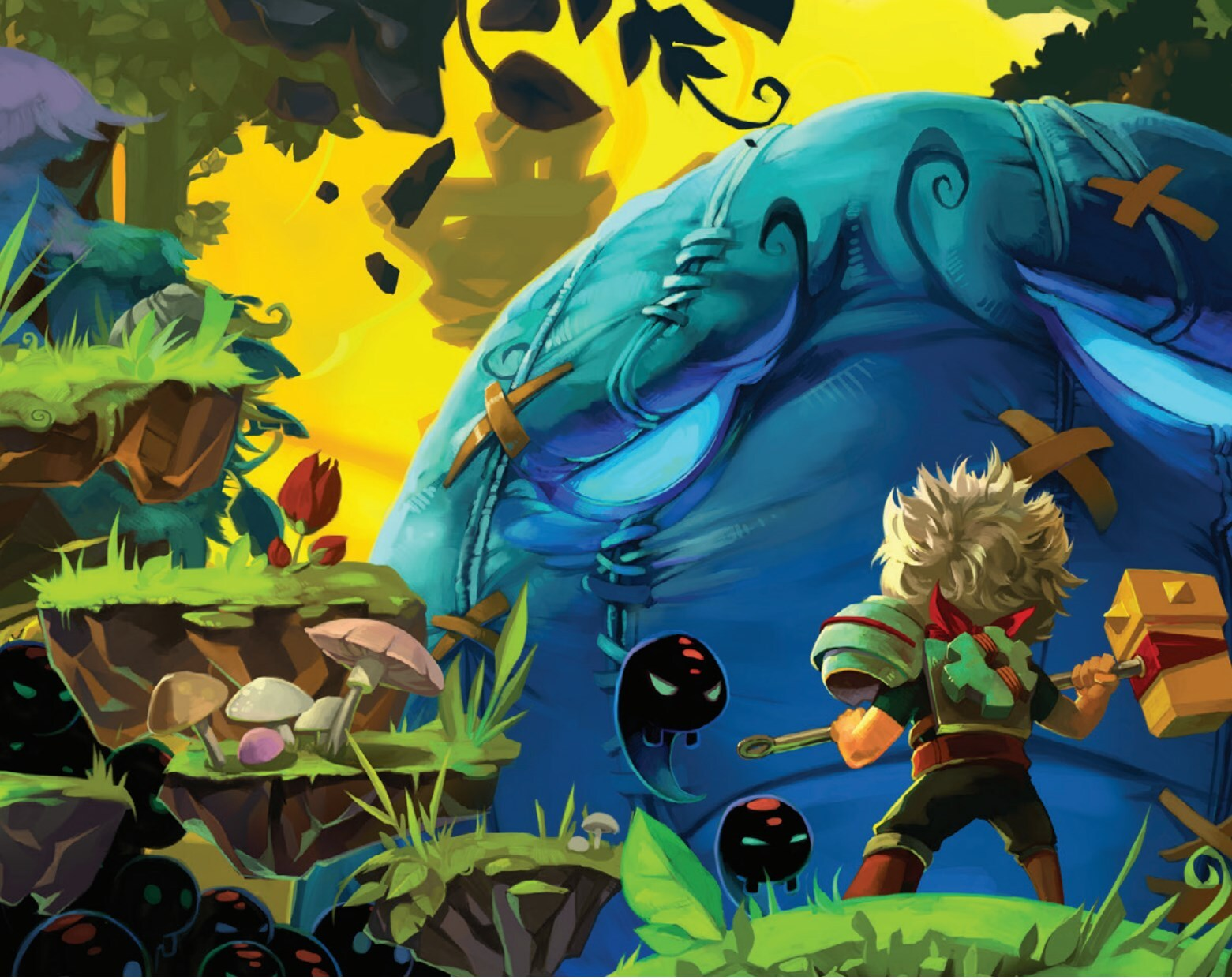
From there, Rao's connections only brought in more talent. He went back to Kasavin for the role of creative director. Kasavin was now at 2K Games, but was ready to quit his job there – even if it meant asking his family for financial help for the first time since high school.

Rao then thought of his former roommate Andrew Wang, who he interned with at EA Orlando, for the role of technical director. At the time, Wang was working at Infinity Ward on the Call of Duty franchise, but he was ready to move on. "I've always wanted to do something with some of the more autonomy and responsibility that comes with the smaller company," he says.

Most of Rao's team members came from his industry contacts, but the last two were his childhood friends; Darren Korb and Logan Cunningham do music and voice work, respectively. Rao met Cunningham in youth soccer, and Rao had been playing Dungeons & Dragons with Korb since elementary school.

Neither Korb nor Cunningham had ever worked in games, but Rao wasn't worried about their experience. "I would say, at the time, it did not seem like a leap of faith," Rao says. "For me, it was a no-brainer to call Darren [Korb] when I needed music and sound on a game, partially because I actually worked on some projects in college and Darren and Logan provided voiceover and music. So, when I ran into the same problem again with music and sound, I called Darren."

There's an old adage that you shouldn't work with friends, but Rao says it's part of what makes Supergiant work: "When things get hard, and they will get hard, having a friend there is really amazing, right?"



WE ALL GOT STORIES WORTH TELLIN'

These seven original members who helped bring Bastion to life are still with the studio today, and have worked together to shape all four of its games. But back when Bastion was in development, none of them knew if Supergiant would have the opportunity to make more games.

The team recalls having an exciting energy around doing something new and on their own – even if they knew it was a risky venture. "The game was made in less than two years, but the first year was just like, 'What the hell are we even doing?'" says Kasavin.

Bastion started with Rao and Simon just passing ideas back and forth and taking scans out of D&D books to use as placeholders. However, things really picked up when Zee joined and got straight to producing assets. "There was no preproduction on Bastion," Kasavin says. "It was ironic to us, because it was a game that was celebrated for its artwork, and people would be like, 'Oh, do you have an art book? I'd love to see an early concept of all this stuff.' But almost everything [Zee] did went straight into the game."

After working at a company where she needed constant approvals, Zee welcomed the challenge. "The feeling that you have ownership and accountability over the entire process is super empowering," she says. "It's also very scary, but right off the bat, I was given so much ownership. It was just really nice, and it was very clear we just needed to get stuff done."

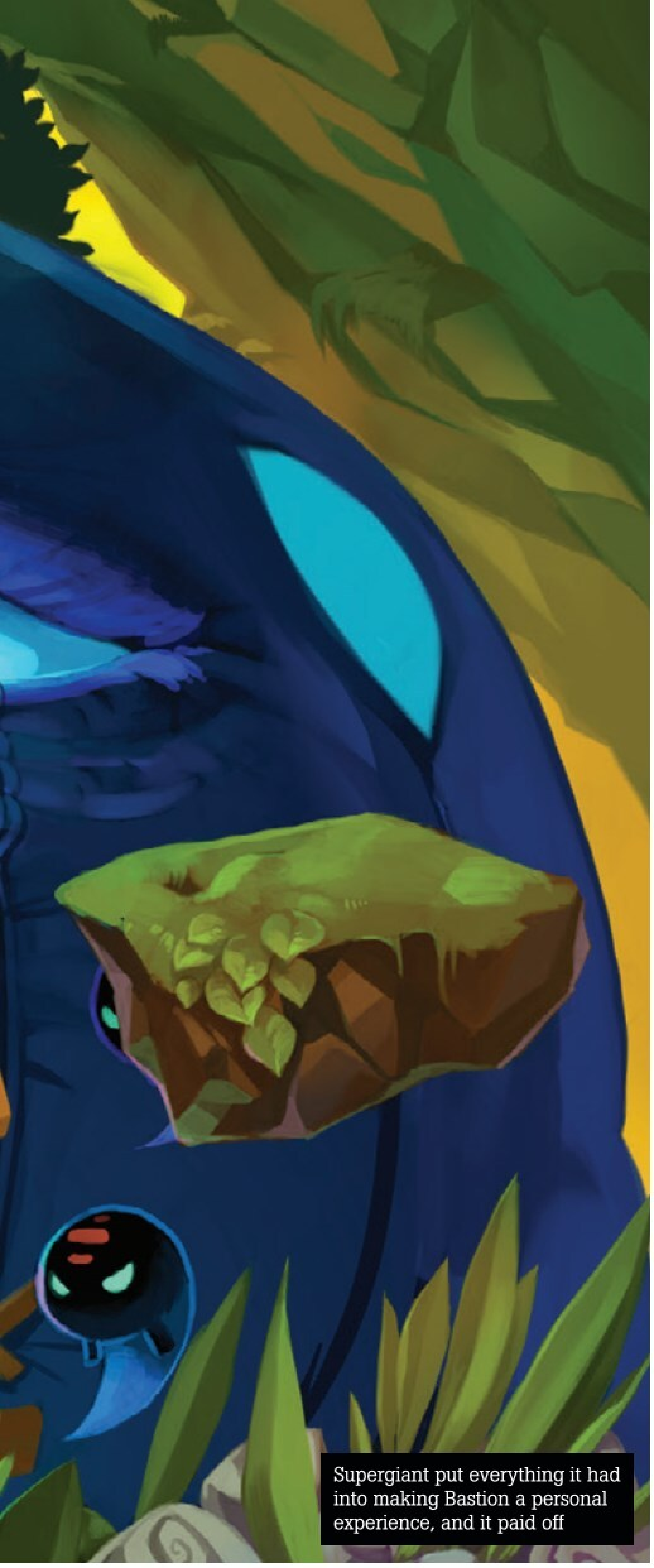
For composer and audio director Darren Korb, learning the process took some time. "For me, an effective way to learn something is to just jump in," he says. "It quickly became apparent that what I thought might work [wouldn't]. For instance, I was trying to do something ultra-realistic at first. It's just like, 'Well, what does it sound like when you hit a box with a hammer?' And it's like, 'Oh, it's not the thing you want it to sound like in a video game.'"

After a fantastic unveiling at PAX 2010 (where the team literally only had 20 minutes of the game made), Bastion debuted on Xbox Live Arcade in July 2011. The action/RPG was met with good reviews and sold decently, but it took time to gain momentum. "I feel like people tend to forget Bastion was not a hit immediately," Cunningham says. "It took some time for people to take notice. But it was huge for me immediately, because it allowed me to leave my day job. I could just focus 100-percent on being an actor."

Bastion hit PC the following month, but Kasavin said its success "crept up" on the team and only became clear toward the end of the year. "We figured, it's a single-player game," he says. "It'll maybe get talked about for a couple of weeks, and then it will just fall by the wayside. But people kept talking about it."

Successful sales and end-of-year award nominations brought Bastion to a new level of profitability. "It was really unexpected, and went against the common wisdom where you take your first month's sales and multiply it by three and that's how you estimate your lifetime sales," Kasavin says. "Nevertheless, it did become fairly clear we're going to be able to stick around with a small team and start paying ourselves livable wages."

It also allowed the team to move out of Rao's living room. However, success brings its own challenges. While Bastion was the start of something, the studio never planned beyond it, and figuring out the next steps proved tricky. "We had nothing to lose [with Bastion]," Rao says. "But suddenly we had a team that was worth keeping, a studio, and a lease."



Supergiant put everything it had into making Bastion a personal experience, and it paid off

AVOIDING THE SOPHOMORE SLUMP

Transistor remains Supergiant's most challenging project to launch. Bastion took 18 months to complete; Transistor's pre-production cycle alone took longer than that. The studio was also growing, adding a few new roles (like a 3D artist) that it had previously hired freelancers for. Eventually, the staff grew up to 12 members.

"We were starting the game with a full team – including more voices and perspectives and learning how to do that," says Rao, adding that things that took weeks to figure out for Bastion took months for Transistor. "There was also all this invisible pressure of wanting to live up to [Bastion] – a game that was really well liked and seemed with time to be getting more well liked."

Supergiant didn't go through a pre-production phase with Bastion, so the team initially welcomed more time to iterate on ideas with Transistor, but then things started taking too long and tensions began to rise. In contrast to Bastion, Supergiant was starting from nothing and trying to do everything – narrative, music, art, and gameplay – at the same time. "The sort of honeymoon phase of having pre-production time ended after a couple of months," Kasavin recalls. "And suddenly we were just wandering in the woods in a way our team never had before."

The team struggled to align on the game's direction, but did agree on some things. Supergiant knew it didn't want to do a Bastion 2, even if that would have been the safe thing. The team also decided early that Transistor would feature a science-fiction love story in a cyberpunk setting – but without the gritty backdrop. "We were really interested in kind of slowing things down and having a game with a more deliberate pace," Kasavin says. "We were seeing if we could capture the kind of drama and suspense of turn-based strategy games where you're biting your nails, wondering if things will go horribly wrong. We wanted to see if we could capture it in an action/RPG setting. I think we got to them in the end, but it was a long, winding road."

Things reached a breaking point right as the team was about to unveil the game at PAX East 2013. "We were so nervous about how it was going to be received that we almost pulled the plug," Kasavin says. The team was set to announce Transistor on a Tuesday, but was still having conversations on the Sunday if they should change course. "That's how tense we were about how the Transistor announcement was going to go over," Kasavin says. "Because even at that point when we felt we had something to show that was like a real expression of what we were working on, we were still getting kind of mixed playtest feedback."

Ultimately, the group decided to move forward, figuring even if they had extra time, it wouldn't fundamentally change anything. "If people didn't like it, it would be better for us to know that sooner," Kasavin says. "But the announcement went over way better than any of us expected. It was just incredibly encouraging."

When it launched in May 2014, Transistor was a success for the studio. And since Supergiant Games self-published it at a higher price point than Bastion, it brought in more money. "I think history may show that Transistor was our most important title because of its immediate success," Cunningham says. "Because it was just like, whatever else the team behind Bastion had next, there was a huge audience in place that was going to get it no matter what."

But it didn't exactly provide all members with the happy feelings they felt after the launch of Bastion. "I love that people love Transistor so much," Cunningham says. "But I don't have very fond memories of that process. It was really hard. It took the most time and we didn't know what it was for a while."

PYRE'S BRILLIANCE AND COMPLICATIONS

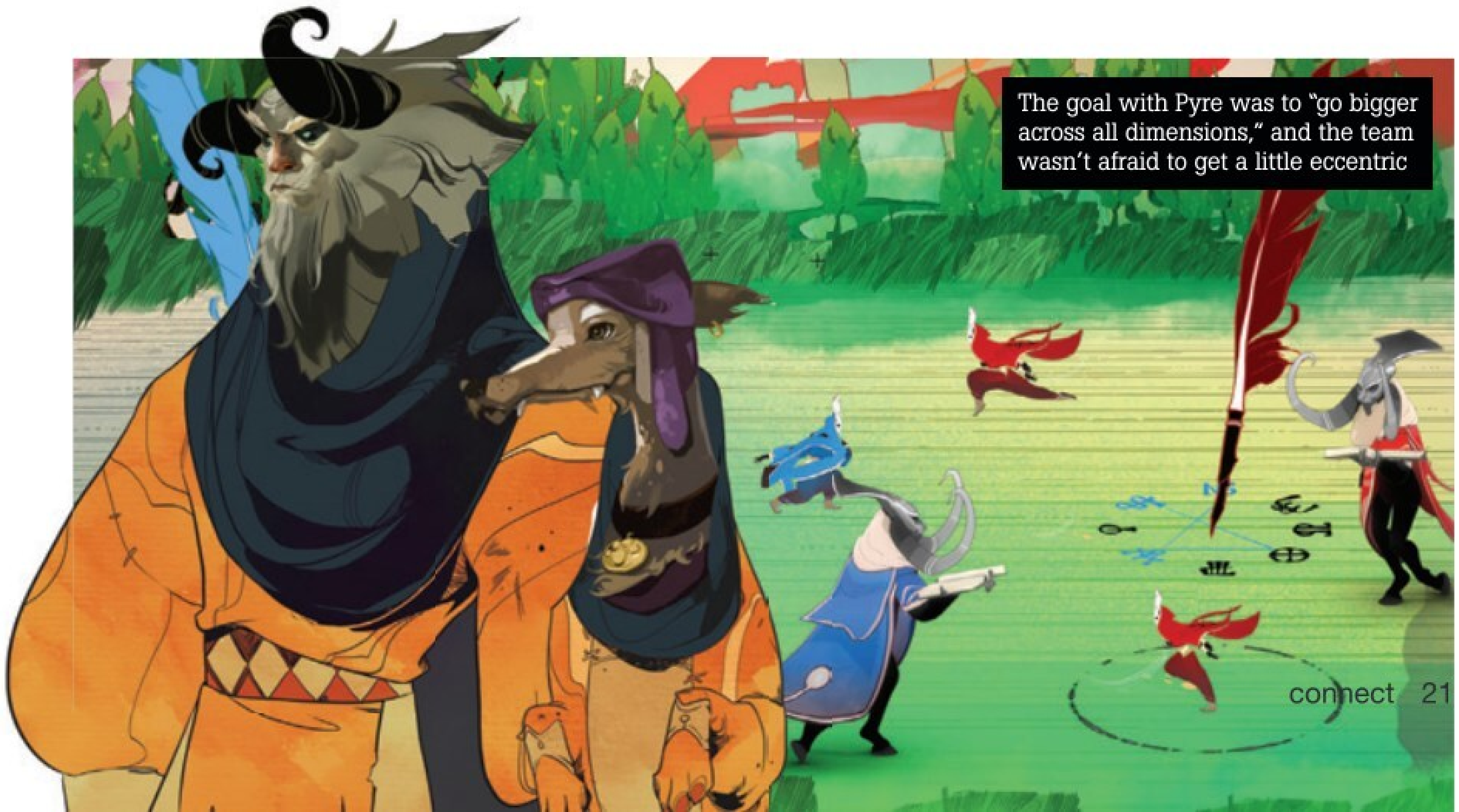
With two hits under its belt, Supergiant had the urge (and resources) to try something more ambitious. According to Cunningham, the work/life balance was starting to "click into place," as more team members were having families. New wellness policies, like mandatory vacation, were ensuring members took care of themselves.

The team also felt it had proved that Bastion wasn't just a flash in the pan, and it was ready to experiment in ways ways it hadn't before. For Supergiant's next game, Pyre, the group decided to go bigger, with a party-based RPG and a procedural narrative. However, it also got a bit experimental and eccentric with NBA-jam inspired gameplay. "We went wild," Zee says.

One important aspect of Pyre's development is how the studio decided on which ideas to pursue. Supergiant believes in a collaborative process, where members discuss their interests and pick the elements that most excite them. As a way to avoid Transistor's long and fraught pre-production issue, Supergiant Games got straight down to business on Pyre. "We just told everybody to go chase their passions and then we'll figure out how to put it together," Kasavin says.

Kasavin tackles the synthesis of those ideas, combining everyone's contributions and deciding what ties them all together for a game concept. "I would go so far as to say that's my primary role," Kasavin says. "That's probably one of the most important things I do, because we're not a studio where one person says, 'Here's the game we're making.' So with Pyre as a concrete example, Amir and Gavin were prototyping this competitive sport. Jen was creating these wild characters – tree people and worm people – and I'm giving my own ideas about what the world and what the play experience can be."

While the Supergiant team might be shy to use the word "sports" to describe Pyre's genre, it was on the studio's mind. Wang recalls fantasy football becoming popular at Supergiant, and the sports fans were wondering how to incorporate the fun of following a team. Then things took an interesting turn. "Amir was talking about retirement, specifically in a sports context when a star athlete has to make that calculation," Kasavin recalls. "Do you go out on top? Do you play another season? And what's going through your head when you do that? That led to these broader conversations about the experience of saying goodbye to a close friend."



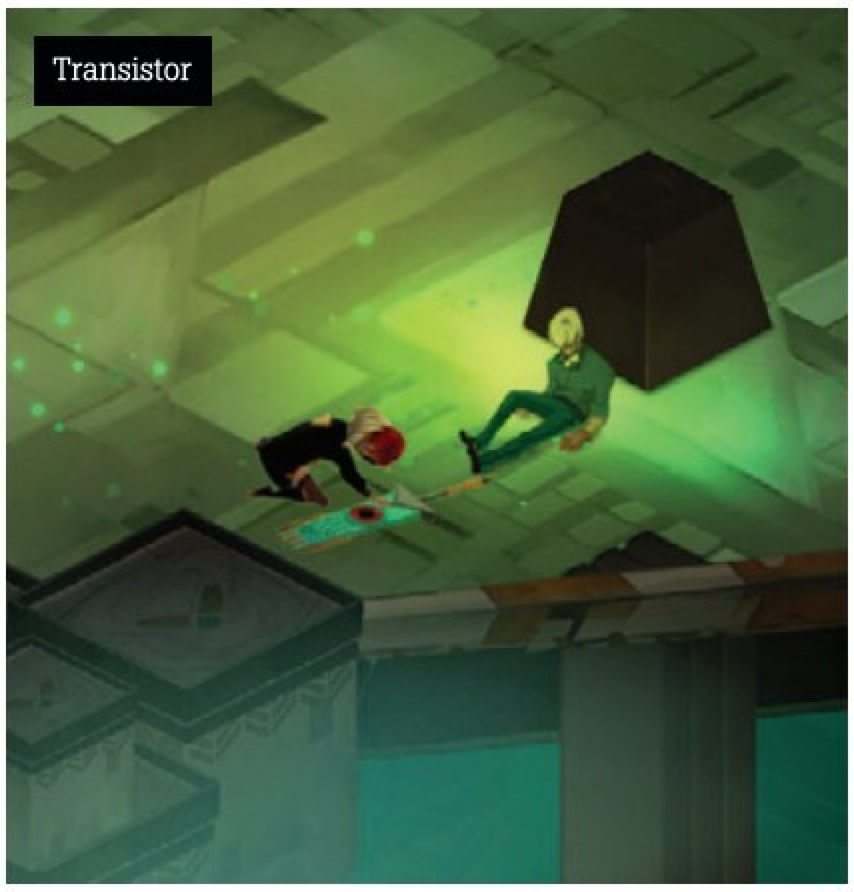
The goal with Pyre was to "go bigger across all dimensions," and the team wasn't afraid to get a little eccentric

Having more characters who interacted with one another, playing in bigger spaces, and accounting for player choices gave the team a lot to take on. "We dreamed big for Pyre, and from the technical side, it ended up being quite challenging," Wang says. "Pyre was almost like doing two games. On the technical side, there were very different requirements for being able to see this wide-open world versus the more reactive, action-oriented sports stuff. What I optimized in one version wouldn't necessarily help the other."

Simon sums up Pyre in a way that captures its beauty and also its problem: "With Pyre, we made a game that there probably is no counterpart for in the game industry," he says. If anything cost Pyre some of its appeal, it was the difficulty people had understanding exactly what the game was.

Pyre launched and received stellar reviews, but it didn't match the sales or status of Bastion and Transistor. However, Pyre did what it needed to. "What we look for in our games is, 'Did it do well enough for us to be able to keep going? And is it a capable game? Do some of our players love it the most out of all our games?' [Pyre] absolutely hit those check marks for us," Kasavin says.

Even if Pyre didn't shine as brightly as the studio's previous titles, it was a stepping stone for what would ultimately be Supergiant's biggest hit. "I've said it before and I'll say it again: I can't imagine that Hades would even exist if not for Pyre," Kasavin says. "I didn't ever get it out of my system – the idea of escaping from purgatory."


Transistor

Amir Rao and Darren Korb are childhood friends who grew up playing D&D together – and still do to this day

WELCOME BACK TO HELL

Pyre and Transistor both took three years to develop – though Pyre is a much bigger game that required the team to learn new skills and tools. While that was certainly a feat, Supergiant still felt it needed to adjust its development process. Up until that point, the studio had always kept quiet about its games, waiting for a big trade show with a playable demo to unveil them. "[We realized] if we're going to be competitive in this business ... if we're gonna get people's attention, we can't do that anymore," Cunningham says. "We can't spend three years working in a vacuum."

It was time to use all they'd learned to their advantage. "We knew what we could do well when it came to atmosphere and narrative, when it came to isometric combat," Rao says. "We knew what we still had yet to learn, because we sort of toyed with that dynamic stuff in Pyre, but we had never done something as dynamic as what a roguelike would be."

The team at Supergiant believes every game is a reaction to the one that came before it. After two longer projects with Transistor and Pyre, Supergiant Games didn't want fans to endure such a wait for its next game. "We were interested in doing something where the pre-production could lead to some sort of release sooner," Rao says "And that's where early access was a natural fit for us." It was the first thing the team decided on before it even set its sights on a roguelite Greek mythology game.

Furthermore, thinking back to its earlier work, particularly Bastion, the team had gotten away from simplicity – the fun in having few barriers to entry. "At this point, we've made three games and you could start to plot this trajectory, where each game was more esoteric than the last," Kasavin says. "I'm like, 'Is this really what we want?' For me, the esoteric quality is not the appeal."

Supergiant also built a reputation for making games that were drastically different from each other, but that approach started to handcuff the team. "Going into Hades, it was like, 'Why are we making this so hard on ourselves?'" Kasavin recalls. "That led to the thinking with Hades of, 'Why don't we just cherry-pick the stuff that we liked doing and consider those as viable ingredients this time?"

At the time of Hades, a lot of the team had started playing roguelikes and loved how each run was different, but wanted each death not to feel so devastating – that there was a discovery and something interesting awaiting you. "We saw a lot of potential in the genre," Rao says. "We thought we had something to add with [our] attention to atmosphere and narrative."

The rest is history, as Hades was one of the most talked-about games of 2020, becoming the studio's fastest-selling game. "It did better than our past games in every measurable way," Kasavin says. "We owe a big chunk of that to the early access development process, where we figured out the shortcomings of the game and what was working. We shipped it with fewer problems."

Still, that didn't mean early access was an easy process. It took time to figure out how often to issue updates so it didn't feel like the team was

What's In The Supergiant Games Name?

Coming up with a name that works for your studio is easier said than done. Studio director Amir Rao credits development director Gavin Simon for coming up with the Supergiant Games moniker, but recalls them all throwing a bunch of ideas into a spreadsheet. The problem? Most of the initial names they came up with had already been copyrighted.

When Simon brought Supergiant Games to the group, they finally found the winner. "Supergiant Games worked for everyone," Rao says. "There was something sort of grand about it, but also something sort of funny, because we were just so small. We liked the space implications of it. It felt right at the time, and then it stuck."

Simon says he still likes the name after all this time, even if the initial studio logo wasn't exactly how he pictured it. "The funniest part of that story to me is how when I came up with the name, I was just thinking about galaxies and stars, and the name had a gamey feel to it. And so, I was imagining this giant supermassive star. As soon as art director Jen [Zee] came along, the logo she drew was this cute Christmas ornament star with a bow on it, which is like totally different to what I had imagined it, but everybody thought it was really cool and fun."

The Supergiant team attends their first PAX

3D animator Thinh Ngo hard at work

constantly shipping a game. Supergiant also had to adapt to the constant feedback loop from its users. “It was both exhausting and exhilarating,” Zee says. “Because you’re constantly putting your work in front of other people and getting this constant stream of positive – mostly positive – feedback, which is really nice. Except for the time my work got compared to a Geocities website from the ’90s [laughs].“

For Hades, Supergiant expanded its team from 12 members to 20 to help achieve its vision. “We had a lot of trepidation around hiring – we always do,” Zee says. “We’re always so scared of expanding because we know what makes us work fast and well together is that we’re small. We actually resisted growing for a long time and it’s just wonderful the ways in which we have grown now have all been so fulfilling.”

Overall, Supergiant was happy with the process and thankful for early access. “We would consider it again because it was so important to Hades,” Rao says. “But it was also really specific for Hades, because it was a game that fit really well with early access. The players there really did help us refine the experience and shore up any of the areas that were falling short.”

THE SUPERGIANT WAY

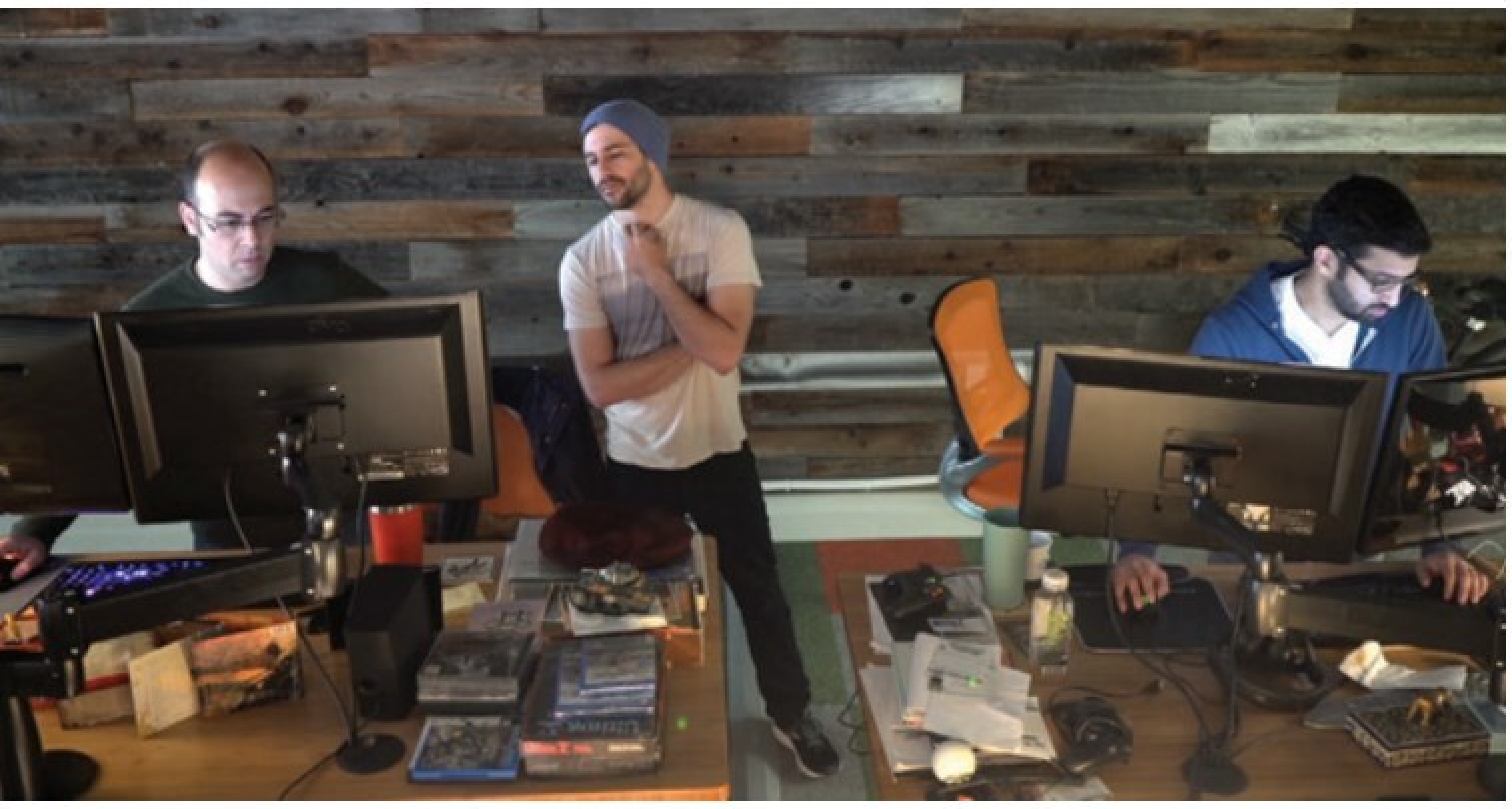
Supergiant Games is approaching 12 years as a studio, and Bastion’s 10-year anniversary is coming up in July. Its founding members began as people passionate about games, chasing the dream of complete creative freedom. “We’ve been really fortunate that every game has allowed us to make the next game without trading our independence,” Rao says.

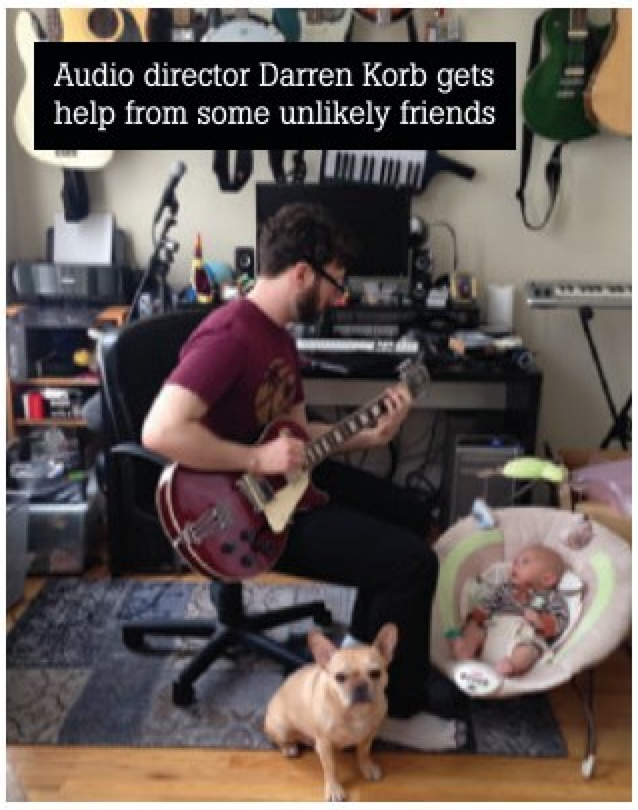
Everything comes back to the people at Supergiant, and it’s the one thing that the team feels makes its games so special. “We’re a group of creative individuals who have all of our own idiosyncrasies and all of our own creative interests, so I guess it’s no surprise that if you put the same ingredients into the pot over and over again, there’s going to be some similarities,” Zee says. “At the same time, I think we all happen to also be tuned creatively in such a way that we are super not interested in doing the same thing over and over again – possibly to a fault. That’s why I think you also get such different products every time.”

Though the group has had to grow into different roles and take on more managerial duties, one thing remains the same: This started as a talented group of friends, and it’s something the team doesn’t take for granted. “I get to do what I love, and I get to work with very old and great friends,” Cunningham says. “The older I get, I realize how that’s weird and that’s rare. It’s wonderful, and I hope it keeps going.”

Rao thinks the group’s success comes down to a lot of factors, but it’s really about how they all complement one another. “I think the key component is we really like working together,” he says. “We love the games that we create; we love each other; we love the feeling when [we] elevate [each other’s] work. When we have something in the game, then it gets the art, music, writing, and is technically sound and runs at 60 fps, all the things that every person contributes here … then suddenly your little thing is a part of this much bigger, better thing.”

With the success of Hades, Supergiant Games has been busy keeping its smash hit going with updates and patches. The team has also taken a much-needed reprieve, and is just starting to think about its next game. Whatever is next, one thing is certain: Supergiant has proven that exciting unpredictability is part of the charm. ◆




Audio director Darren Korb gets help from some unlikely friends

MAKING NIER NEW AGAIN

Looking back and forward at the entry that started it all

When Nier: Automata was released in 2017, it was a surprise success for publisher Square Enix and developer PlatinumGames, selling over 5 million copies. The action/RPG fascinated players with its thought-provoking story, interesting boss battles, and unconventional design. However, back in 2010, its predecessor – simply called Nier – set the stage. The original Nier wasn't the most polished or impressive in the gameplay department, but it struck an emotional chord and became a cult hit.

People who missed that first entry are getting a new opportunity to see it at its best. Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139, which hits on April 23, is a rerelease of the original with an array of interesting updates. We sat down with series creator Yoko Taro and Replicant's development director Saki Ito to reflect on the game and their approach to bringing it back for a new generation.

by Kimberley Wallace

REPLICANT VERSUS GESTALT

Originally, two versions of Nier were released in Japan: Replicant for PS3, and Gestalt for Xbox 360. This will be North America's first time experiencing Replicant. The difference? In Replicant, you play as a brother trying to save his sister rather than a father searching for a cure for his daughter.

Yoko Taro (via his Zoom video stand-in, a Kermit the Frog puppet) says this impacts very little in terms of the story, and it was more of a marketing idea. "Whenever there is the same title being released on multiple platforms, people tend to compare the technical aspects of it, like framerate and graphics," he explains. "In order to bring out a complete difference because they're on different platforms, you might as well just use different characters, so that it will take their attention away from technical aspects and they'll pay more attention to the more obvious difference of the characters."

FINDING INSPIRATION

When asked how he came up with his ideas for Nier, Taro says he's giving us a different answer than what he's told other members of the media. "I was actually quite tired with the production of games," he says. "I thought, 'This might be the last piece of work that I might create in video game media.' And if I were to make this my last title, I wanted to do something that's quite normal – a regular action/RPG."

Taro says his mind went to Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time for inspiration, but when he consulted with Square Enix producer Yosuke Saito, Saito turned it down, saying he wanted "something unusual." Not wanting the gameplay to be "just going into a dungeon and killing characters," he looked to the narrative to make it stand out. "Thinking about the story, I also wanted to go with something very traditional," says Taro, who looked to Shonen Jump manga like *Bleach* and *Hunter x Hunter* for inspiration. "Those were quite twisted in their own right," he says. "I feel like Nier [matched that]."

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

While Nier focused on the power of words and their meaning, Taro had an ulterior motive for the theme. "I'm sorry if this breaks the illusion, but using words doesn't require much effort and graphical depiction. It actually saves on resource allocation. We did our best to make a very appealing game and tried to incorporate the element of words and the weight they carry, but again, the start of it all was just trying to save some pennies."

Nier's cast featured the kind-yet-troubled Emil, hot-tempered Kaine, and egotistical talking book Grimiore Weiss. Kaine's and Grimoire Weiss' banter became a highlight for fans. Taro says he made it a point to have random, non-meaningful conversations to give players a breather from the chaos of battle.

"In an RPG, you have many times where you're trying to defeat this particular enemy and you've got these very strong emotions like, 'I hate him.' [I had banter] as a way to relieve that stress."

MAKING THE OLD FEEL NEW

Despite the original's status as a cult hit, Taro was on the fence about the entire Replicant project, fearing it will be unfairly compared to Automata. "I was actually against doing a remaster or a version update of [the original Nier] because it is a very old game, and the story will probably come across as old if people play it in this modern day," he says. "However, working with [developer] Toylogic and seeing how they were able to get the quality really high, I feel that we were able to create a place where people who played this game before can get together for a reunion. As for new players, I have no idea how they're going to react to this."

Development director Saki Ito was a fan of the original game and actually went back to play it before starting work on Replicant ver.1.22474487139. "Parts still really stick out to me," he says. "Some of them being the very difficult decisions that I had to make. Just being able to go through with [the choices] and owning that experience of making it my story was something very memorable to me."

THE BIG CHANGES

One of things from the original Ito did want to improve for Replicant was the action, using Automata as a reference and target goal. "We did change some of the action elements," he confirms. "Some of the more recognizable changes would be the movement speed, as well as the variation of the moves."

Ito says you can now lock-on to targets, and the team altered the way enemies move and react to players. "A lot of the times, I looked at it and thought to myself, 'I didn't expect to change this much of the game," he says. "But because the resolution has become higher, there were more elements that stuck out that I felt required some touch-ups so that it would look good on screen."

Toylogic not only enhanced the enviorments and character faces, but also added more subtle improvements in character positioning and camera movements. "We also wanted to make Grimoire Weiss more prominent to make sure that he is recognized as the protagonist's buddy and have that connection with the character," Ito says.

Over a decade later, people who haven't played Nier can finally see what made it so special that the series managed to live on after its original studio, Cavia, shuttered. "We hope people will [play] this and recognize, 'This is how it all started; this is what Nier is about," Ito says. "We updated it so that people can now play it very comfortably and very smoothly while still having that nostalgic feeling that this was a game that existed in the past."

The Weird Name

We couldn't help but ask creator Yoko Taro the story behind that number sequence in Nier Replicant ver.1.22474487139's name. "To be honest, I did not want to put numbers on it," he says. "I wanted it to be Nier Replicant but Yosuke Saito, producer of the game, really wanted to express that this is an updated version. So I was thinking, 'Okay, this is an updated version, but we also don't want this to be referred to as a remaster. So it's not a version two, neither is it a remake, but it's not quite 1.55. Okay, let's pare it down a little more, maybe, it's 1.22.' That was the thinking behind it. As far as whether or not I can memorize the number – no, I have not, and I've been calling it 'the updated version' all the time."

SNOWY SETTINGS

by Joe Juba

The Final Climb

Journey

Journey begins with your character leaping through the sun-parched desert. However, at the end of the game you trudge through the snow as chilly blasts of air slow you down, blow you off ledges, and practically erase the boundaries that confine your consciousness to your body. It's not an easy climb, but it is certainly a rewarding one.

Narshe

Final Fantasy VI

The Final Fantasy series has plenty of wintery locations, but in Narshe you can sense the desolation of the environment and the desperation of the villagers as they fight – however pointlessly – against your Magitek armor and the overwhelming force of the Empire.

The College Of Winterhold

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

This wizarding school is nestled in a frozen corner of the world. For a magically inclined Dragonborn, however, the remote castle feels like home; powerful mages can train you in various disciplines, and when you can throw fireballs at will, the cold doesn't seem so bad.

Snowpeak Ruins

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

The icy mansion of Snowpeak Ruins is unique and challenging, and it hides a cool ball-and-chain weapon for Link to find. However, the dungeon also has a memorable story about a kind yeti, his sick wife, and the excellent healing properties of soup – the official food of snowy winters.

The Mountain

God of War

Considering how much of God of War's opening hours you spend trying to reach the top of the mountain, it is likely to get built up in your mind. And when Kratos and Atreus finally reach the summit (after exploring cavernous ruins and fighting a gigantic dragon), it does not disappoint.

Ambarino

Red Dead Redemption II

Ambarino captures the unique sense of being far from civilization; the harsh cold drains your stamina, few paths point you toward safety, and wildlife roams freely. When players venture through this area, they feel like intruders in the vast and quiet natural world.

Chill Penguin's Stage

Mega Man X

Of all the ice levels in Mega Man games, what makes this one special? The main attraction is a suit of robotic armor. You can hop into this powerful vehicle and move forward unimpeded, punching and pushing your opposition aside just like a snowplow the morning after a blizzard.

Irithyll Of The Boreal Valley

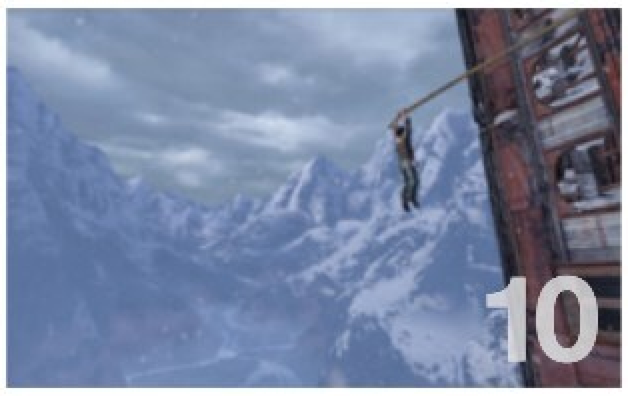
Dark Souls III

While the incredible vista that awaits you when you first see Irithyll is stunning, the silent and cold city streets can send chills into even the most seasoned adventurer. From Software tends to excel when it comes to wintery worlds, and the Boreal Valley is no exception.

Southwest

Death Stranding

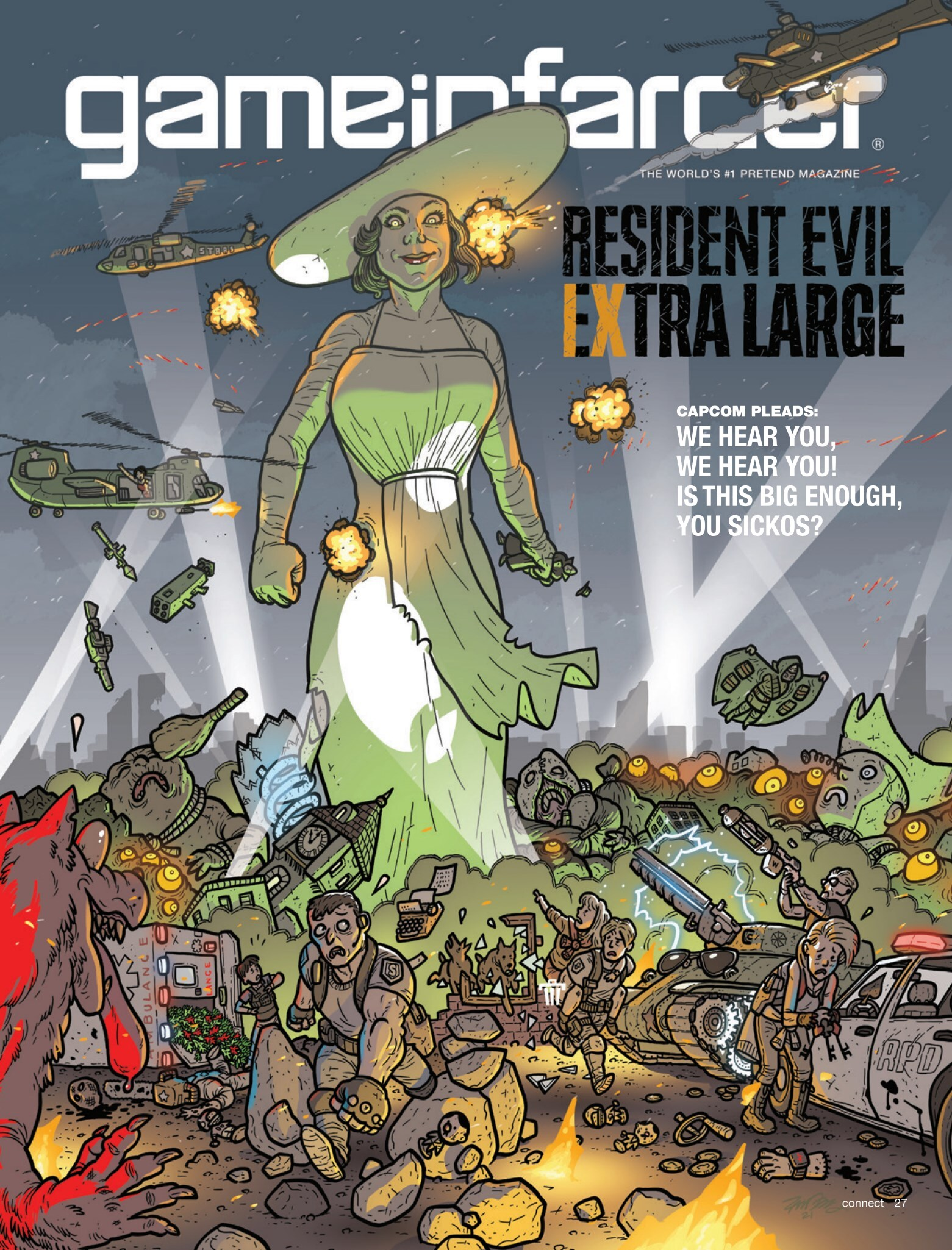
Few games convey the tactile sensation of tromping through snow like Death Stranding. The southwest area of the main map puts players in that position, making them feel the resistance of each step, the weight of the payload on their back, and the flurries blowing in their faces.



The Train Wreck

Uncharted 2

Nathan Drake is a magnet for trouble, so of course he finds himself dangling perilously over a freezing gorge. However, as precarious this position may be, you can't deny that his snowy surroundings are gorgeous – and you can feel the relief when he reaches solid (if frigid) ground.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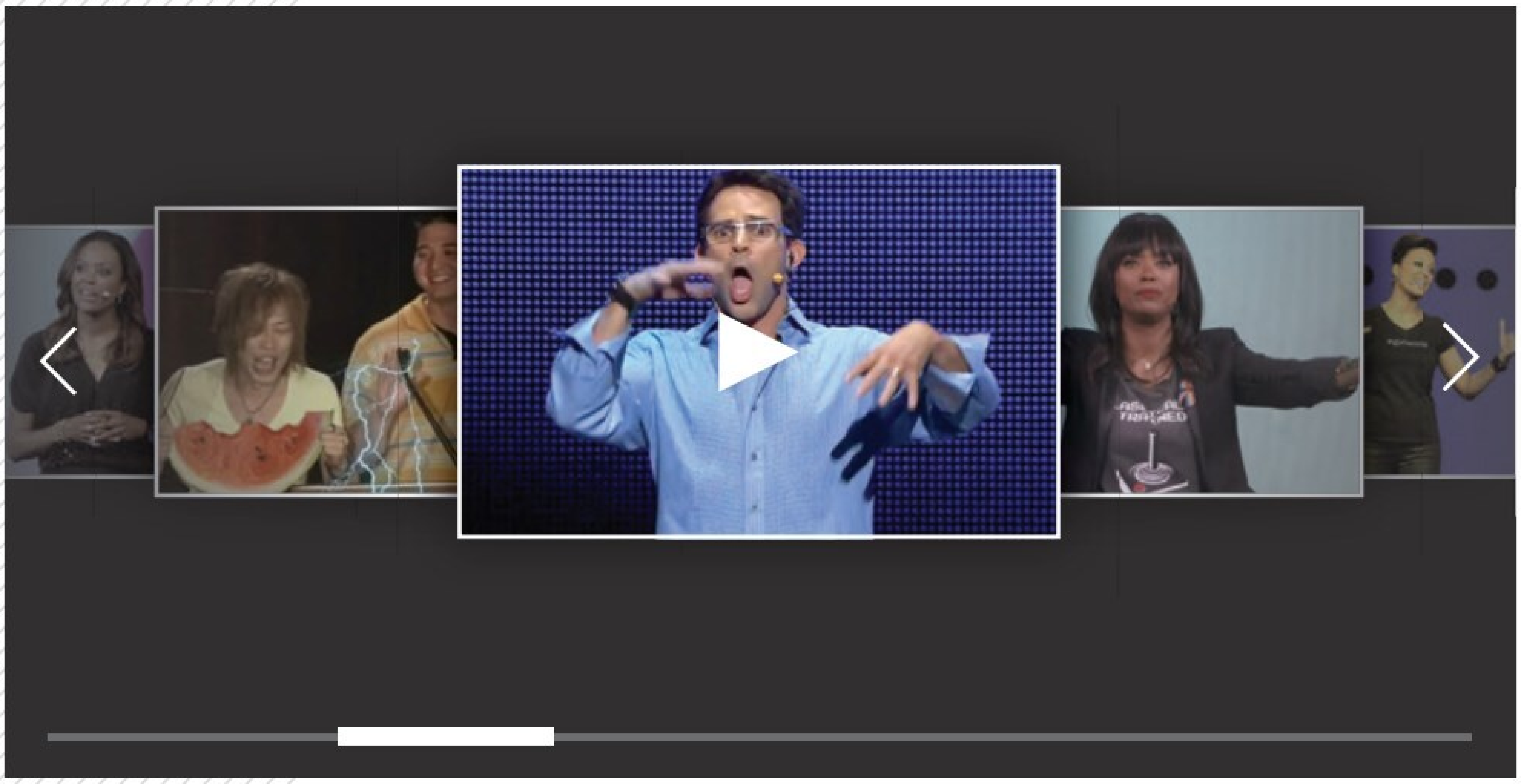
ESA Announces E3 Legendary Edition

In lieu of another year without a "real" E3, the ESA has an announcement sure to appease fans of advertisements, industry in-jokes, and pre-alpha footage. The E3 Legendary Edition, which collects, updates, and remasters fan-favorite E3 moments throughout the years, is expected to be released in summer 2021.

E3 Legendary Edition features "up to 32 hours of content" for fans to enjoy. This includes Konami's historic 2010 press conference, every appearance by Aisha Tyler, and *G4*'s entire archive of booth babe videos. Additionally, the ESA has confirmed the remaster will ship with 1,236 trailers debuted throughout the conference's history, but this time uprezzed to 4K with HDR, meaning everything will assuredly look worse and muddier than developers originally intended. Audio has received a complete overhaul, and in some cases, has been entirely re-recorded for the remaster, such as Mr. Caffeine's "performance" from Ubisoft's 2011 press conference now starring Nolan North. And finally, it's not all old content: The ESA announced E3 Legendary Edition will launch with the names, addresses, and personal information of 250 new press members throughout the world, in addition to all the information it leaked in 2019. The E3 Legendary Edition: Limited Edition comes with an authentic undercooked pizza slice from the Los Angeles Convention Center.



"We hope gamers' bodies are ready, because like a giant enemy crab, The E3 Legendary Edition™ is coming quicker than a Riiiidge Racer!" said Stanley Pierre-Louis, the CEO of the ESA, in a press release.

The E3 Legendary Edition will be released this summer. It'll be free for press members and exorbitant for any fans that would actually get something out of the show and have a good time. « ***Darth Clark***

After Saving The World, Hero Returns Home And Sleeps On Top Of Sheets Like A Weirdo

Throg returned to his modest home Tuesday morning after vanquishing his mortal foe, Ka'al, and bringing the Gaia Crystals to their rightful place inside The Whispering Tree shrine. It was a long journey, made longer when Throg's horse got his leg stuck between two boulders.

While dreaming, he recalled some of the highlights from his journey. Hundreds of Ka'al's accursed legion fell to Throg's blade, though he saved his most gruesome eviscerations for the last standing member of each cluster of foes. Time seemed to slow as Throg knocked a pikeman or ax-wielding barbarian to their knees, kicked their chest, and then lopped their head clean off. Afterward, Throg celebrated by pulling an empty mug of mead to his lips and pantomimed a stamina-replenishing gulp.

The hero awoke, fully dressed, and walked over to his simmering cauldron. The bubbling pot of tan liquid had sat alone for months, but it was as nourishing as the day it first materialized, along with everything else in Throg's home. Throg consumed it in three swipes of his spoon and then left the empty bowl on the table so it could disappear.

"I only wish I could have shared this meal with The Raveness," Throg said to nobody. She truly was a beauty, and Throg longed to have held her hand, but intertwining fingers was beyond their capacity. Instead, their doomed courtship was limited to smashing their faces together and taking their shirts off before darkness came.

Throg dropped all of his newly acquired goods in a pile on the floor and assumed a fetal position on his bed, on top of his sheets, as was his way. Ignoring the chill, he slept and advanced the remainder of his days, 24 hours at a time. « ***Darth Clark***

EXCLUSIVE:

My Uncle Who Worked For Nintendo Got Promoted To Fortnite

Hey guys, I know what you're thinking: "Here comes Jaden, the kid who has all the cool secrets about what's next for Mario and Zelda and Pokémon, because his uncle works at Nintendo." I hate to break it to you, fellas, but that well of information is about to run dry. My uncle – the same guy who told me that the next Splatoon game is like Grand Theft Auto and you can drive cars that shoot paint and hijack a rocketship and go to the original game – doesn't work at Nintendo anymore. He got promoted … to Fortnite!

He just started a few weeks ago, so he doesn't know ALL the secrets yet. I did manage to get some cool information from him, though. Remember that Galactus fight at the end of that Marvel season? Did you know that you can actually play as him? I gave my Gamertag to my uncle, and he gave me access to Galactus and every skin and emote in the game. You basically stomp on everyone on the island and one-hit them. And you can pick up the towers in Steamy Stacks and smoke them like cigarettes and also walk over to the waiting-room island and then you get the bus as a glider. It's really cool.

The next season is going to be even better than any of the old ones. You're going to be able to build guns and bombs, and then your forts can be like army bases. Also, that Lexa anime skin was a test – they're going to be adding Naruto and Avatar into the game. Fortnite saw what Roblox is doing, and they're putting Peppa Pig and Jeff the Killer into the game, too, but that might not happen until the next season. Either way, my uncle is giving me free Battle Passes and V-Bux for life. It's awesome.

And before you ask, he left the Smash Bros. code for zero-suit Zero Suit Samus in his old desk at Nintendo and they wouldn't let him go back in and grab it. He showed it to me on his phone though, and it was really great guys. Honestly. « ***Jaden Clark, Age 10***

What Is Head Of Xbox Phil Spencer Teasing Now?

Fans love to speculate about what their favorite studios are working on, and head of Xbox Phil Spencer loves to feed into that unsatisfiable greed. For years, the Microsoft executive has teased upcoming games by hosting press conferences wearing shirts that feature beloved characters. And remember when Spencer tweeted about getting a new fridge more than four years ago? That was clearly a subtle nod to fans about the soon-to-be-popular Xbox fridge meme. Well, Spencer is at it again.

During a Microsoft press conference announcing 17 new games, fans were most eager to dissect Spencer's home office for clues about unrevealed projects. Viewers were quick to point out that Spencer's steampunk-inspired clock could be a reference to an upcoming Gears of War title. Others noticed that Spencer's shirt looked "a bit dorky," kind of like something a novelist might wear, leading them to speculate that Microsoft will soon revive the beloved Remedy franchise Alan Wake.

However, one of the most interesting elements to Spencer's office was a pair of ski goggles, which had been suspiciously discarded on the floor. This set Twitter ablaze with speculation that Microsoft is working on a gritty, modern update to SkiFree, the classic skiing game that everyone had on their computers in the '90s but no one remembers why.

We reached out to Spencer for a comment, asking if there was any merit to this conjecture. The Xbox head responded with, "For the last time, no! Now, please leave me alone. We're trying to eat dinner."

Further investigation, however, may have turned up a tease that was previously overlooked. The day after the show, a Reddit user named Sherlock_Gnomes hit the nail on the head when they posted a comment that read, "Guys! Look at the car in his room and the giant hole in the wall! His house is in a real state of decay! Get it! They're working on a new State of Decay game!" « ***Darth Clark***

Nintendo Cancels Plans To Add Popular Sword Wielders To Smash Bros. Following Fan Complaints

In response to years of fan feedback over too many sword characters in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, series creator Masahiro Sakurai released a special Smash Bros. Direct this week.

Sakurai began the stream by stating the fans' complaints had "deeply affected" him on an emotional level, and he solemnly swore to never add another sword user.

"You all have been politely screaming at me for a while to stop adding sword characters to Smash," Sakurai explained, his eye twitching. "I realize actions speak louder than words, so I figured it's best to show you how committed I am to pleasing the lot of you."

He pulled out a photo of Chrono, the hero of Chrono Trigger and a long-requested Smash Bros. fighter. "Ah yes, Chrono. I had big plans for this one but I realize he is both a sword wielder and an anime man. All of you have made it abundantly clear that you want no part of him in Smash for this reason, so consider your wish granted." Sakurai then held the photo up to the camera and slowly tore it down the middle.

Sakurai didn't stop there. He then opened a small safe containing a rough sketch of Halo's Master Chief battling Mario, remarking, "It took years to pull this one off. Oh wait, doesn't he use a laser sword?" He then crumpled the drawing and tossed it out the window of his corner office.

This went on for a surprising 57 minutes. At one point, Sakurai ordered his secretary to feed a sheet of move-lists for Ninja Gaiden's Ryu Hayabusa into a nearby shredder. Around the 32-minute mark, he brandished a real-life sword and sliced a big "X" into Zagreus from Hades. "It's uncanny how some of the coolest characters use sword weapons. Oh well!" laughed Sakurai as he grinded his heel into a photo of Kingdom Hearts' Sora while "Simple And Clean" played in the background.

Sakurai ended the video in dramatic fashion: by setting fire to a photo of Waluigi holding what appeared to be a crudely Photoshopped picture of Excalibur. « **Darth Clark**

Future Call Of Duty Updates Will Be 50GB Minimum And Will Also Erase A Loved One From Your Memory

The install size of Call of Duty updates have ballooned to the point where physical memory won't be enough anymore. Instead of finding better methods of file compression, Activision instead announced that future updates will instead take up a portion of the player's actual memory.

Unfortunately, just as with physical drives, your brain can only handle so much memory – especially when that data contains the sharpest textures and flashiest particle effects in the business. Activision warns that Call of Duty updates are now large enough to overwrite cherished memories, whether they be a first kiss, the birth of a child, or how to stop on roller skates.

"When weighing the price of buying a new hard drive versus the free cost of erasing likely unwanted memories, we assumed our players wouldn't mind forgetting a wedding or two if it meant enjoying the latest season of Warzone," says Activision executive Ronald Bueller.

A younger Call of Duty player we spoke to over Zoom cocked her head sideways when we asked if her parents were aware of the change. "My what now?" she responded, confused. The player was also incapable of providing her name.

Not everyone seems bothered by the change. "It's hard to get mad about the updates when you can't remember what you lost in the first place," says Shannon Smith, a top ranked Modern Warfare player. "I'd rather agonize over which mother-in-law to forget than be forced to uninstall Destiny 2 or Red Dead ... something."

Activision declined to comment on rising reports that players are seeing advertisements for battle passes when they close their eyes. « **Darth Clark**

OPINION:

I Am Not Entertained

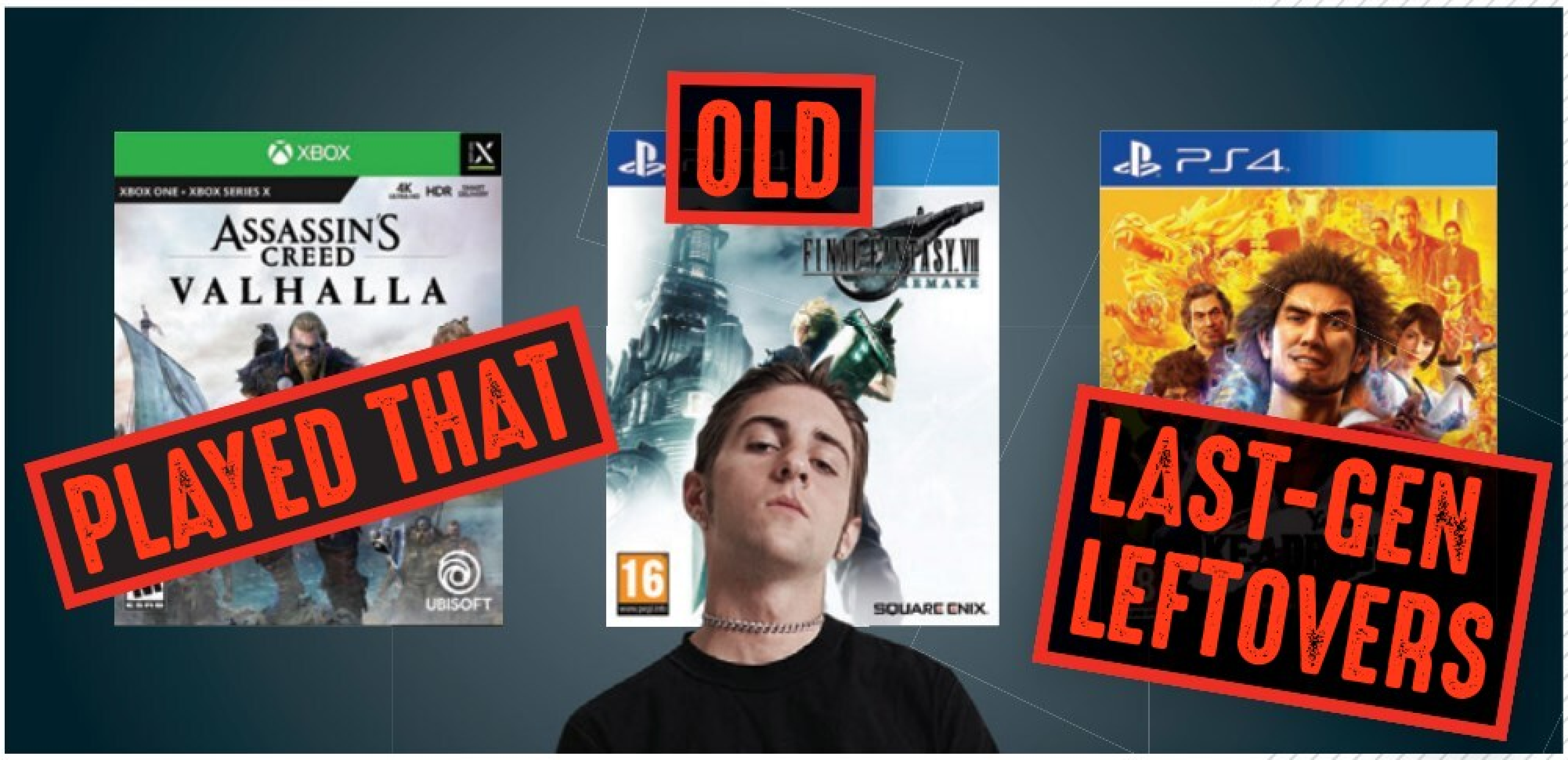
When Sony and Microsoft launched their next-gen consoles last fall, you foolishly assumed they were better. As you waited in online purchase queues, you said, "Oh, it's totally okay that there are basically no new or exclusive games for these systems I am trying to pay hundreds of dollars for!" But as a gaming journalist, my standards are a bit higher than yours, and this so-called "next generation" is a colossal disappointment.

Look, I don't care if all the new and old games on the PS5 and Xbox Series X/S have better graphics, performance, and gameplay. That's not what being a gamer is about! We all know that new experiences trump good ones. Sony and Microsoft's failure to immediately deliver breathtaking new IP and surprising exclusives has already doomed the new systems.

I've already played every good game from the last generation (like most people), so I don't care about optimized versions of them. So what if God of War, Yakuza: Like a Dragon, or Assassin's Creed Valhalla are amazing games made better by the use of the next-gen technology? They are ancient history now! And don't even get me started on the lack of console exclusives; if a title releases on multiple platforms, my excitement level plummets. Games are art, and by definition, art is better and more important when it is accessible only to a limited audience. Letting everyone experience a piece of art only cheapens it.

I don't think my expectations for this generation of consoles are unreasonable: I just want to play completely mind-blowing games that are unlike anything I have ever seen before and that transform my personal idea of what interactive entertainment can accomplish. What's so hard about that?

« **Darth Clark**



Guy Who Called Devs Lazy Spends Day Watching Boss-Tips Videos

Hank Jarvis, 24, spent much of Saturday morning complaining to his roommate about Bloodborne. His latest complaint centered on the fact that he couldn't see the characters behind various doors and windows, and he had to interact with disembodied voices instead. "[From Software] are so freaking lazy!" he shouted before pausing the game to watch a video on how to kill the Maneater Boar after encountering the beast and immediately getting trampled to death.

"This is such lazy game design," he exclaimed after finally felling the creature, thanks to the help from a tutorial video that showed how to roll away from the big pig's attacks. "It's not even really that hard. They just make bosses do unfair stuff to make the game seem longer. Lazy."

Jarvis' anger increased when he encountered the Shadow of Yharnam boss. "Oh my god," he yelled. "This is just three of the same guys! They couldn't even be bothered to make three different guys. Unbelievable."

His roommate, Patricia Jarvis, 49, pointed out that each of the three Shadows appeared to have different weapons and attack patterns, which elicited more ranting from Jarvis. "This sucks. I'm not wasting my time with this garbage," Jarvis said, before watching several additional tutorial videos. Hours later, after being repeatedly burned, stabbed, and killed by snakes, Jarvis finally defeated the trio. "After all that hard work, there wasn't even a cool death animation or anything. How hard could that be?!"

Jarvis spent the rest of the weekend completing Bloodborne after summoning other players into his game using the Beckoning Bell. "They don't even have online matchmaking," he told one player. "So, so lazy. And thanks for beating Vicar Amelia for me; I don't have the right weapon for it right now."

« **Darth Clark** ◈

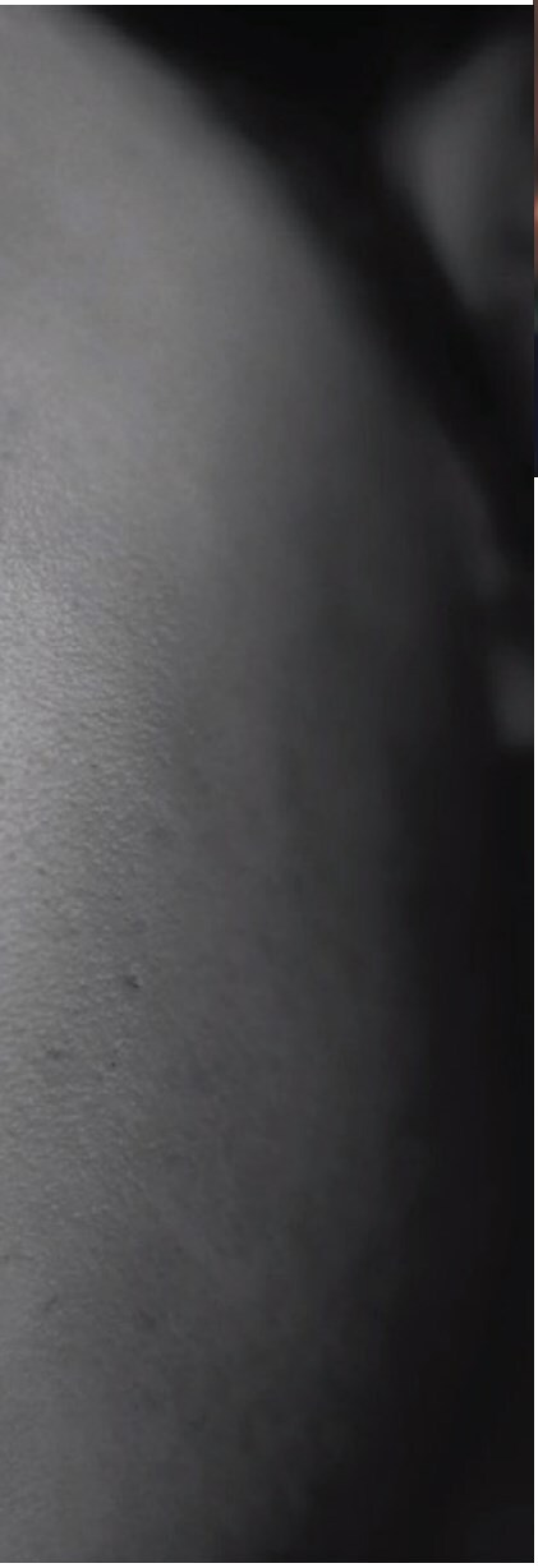
How To Build A Murder Mystery

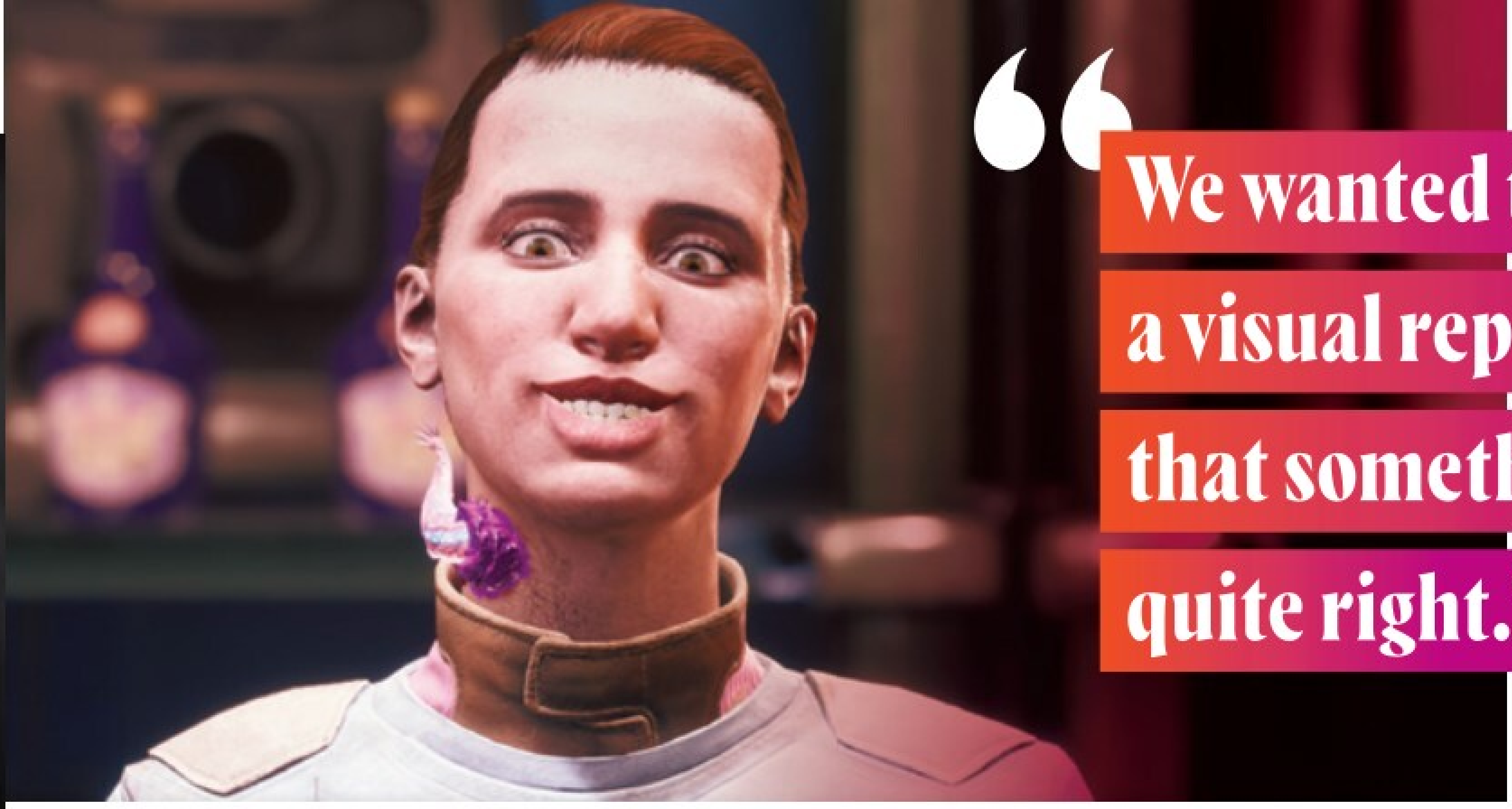
The Outer Worlds' final DLC is something completely different

by Liana Ruppert

It's murder. It's a mystery. It's a murder mystery! Obsidian Entertainment took The Outer Worlds in a completely different direction for its last expansion, this time tasking players with solving a satirical murder mystery on Eridanos. The final adventure pivots away from Peril on Gorgon's darkness; instead, it offers a more paradoxical journey of whiskey and smiles – if you ignore the murder, the mystery, and creepy parasites.

Harkening back to the morbid humor that the base game offers, Murder on Eridanos takes players on a wild ride with a pulp-noir-inspired murder mystery. Halcyon Helen has been murdered, and to solve this unthinkable crime, players must travel to the world of Eridanos to meet new faces, undertake new quests, and find all-new ways to be thoroughly creeped out by corporate shenanigans.





> “We wanted to have a visual representation that something wasn’t quite right.” –*Megan Starks, game director*

But what was the inspiration behind this unusual new adventure? We talked to narrative designer Nitai Poddar and game director Megan Starks to learn more about what it takes to build a murder mystery adventure in a universe where corporations choose who lives and dies and corpses perish into nothing with blank smiles on their faces.

According to Starks, the idea behind Murder on Eridanos came from an assortment of ideas that “we all just kind of threw at the wall,” but the main consensus is that the team wanted to take players on a fun adventure that felt new and familiar at the same time. Poddar elaborates, saying that Eridanos and Gorgon’s stark difference is “the Outer Worlds secret sauce. We will take something very dark and not funny, and we will juxtapose it right next to something completely ridiculous. And that sudden shift between super dark and super funny is something we just really find compelling; that’s really what drove how we wanted to tell this story.”

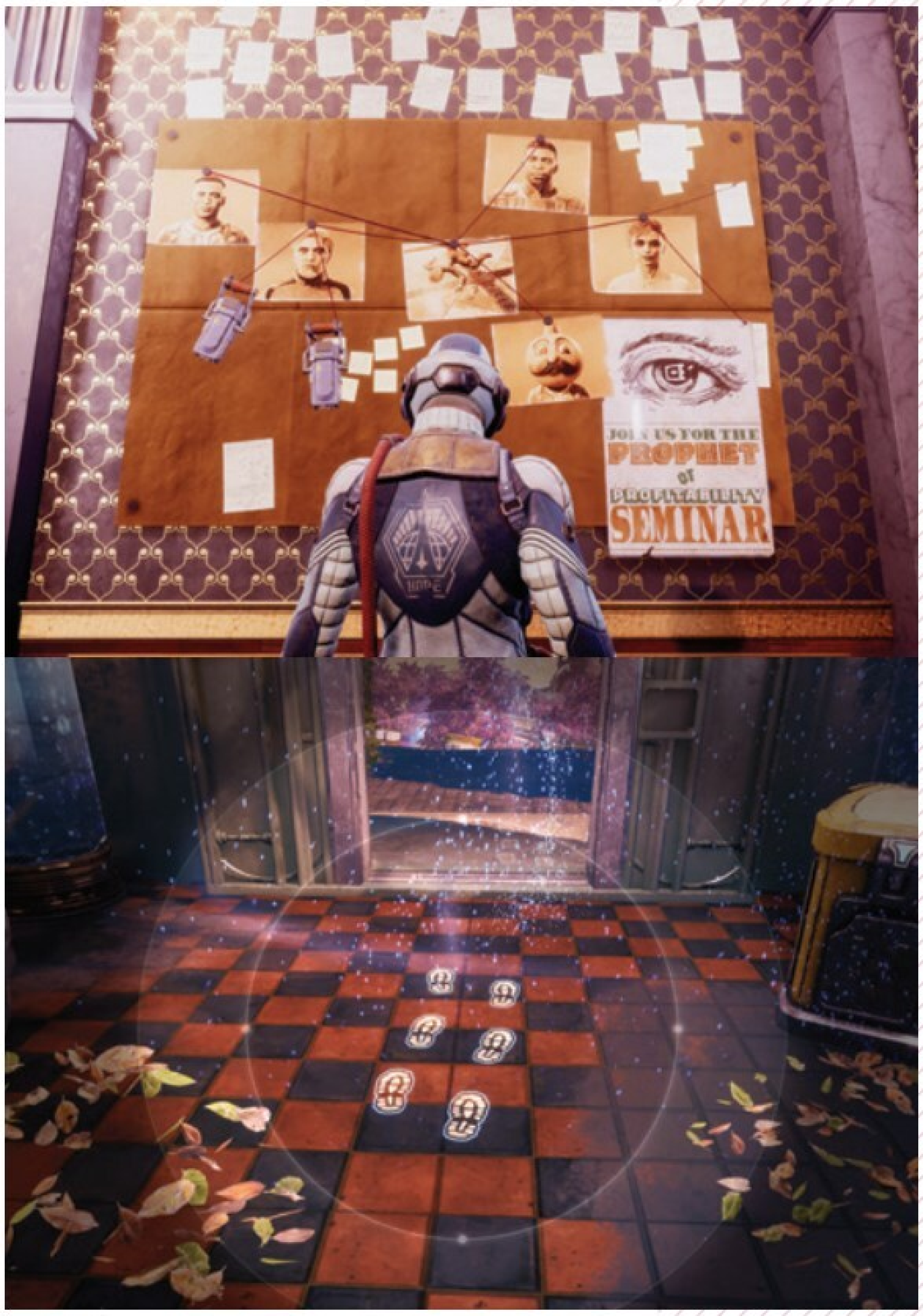
According to Poddar, the core of The Outer Worlds’ DNA is its pulp fiction, old school, dime novel aesthetic. That inspiration is prevalent throughout the game, especially with the loading screen art and fictional advertisements. “We wanted to get back to the roots of what inspired Outer Worlds, taking it back to this kind of pulp-novel vibe you’d pick up off of a newsstand in 1925,” Poddar says. “It was very over-the-top too back then, so we thought, ‘Why don’t we have a murder mystery and have players take on a clear, defined role in becoming the ‘investigator?’ Once that goal was in mind, we built the story around that.”

While players can clearly see the pulp noir influence throughout Murder on Eridanos, there was another powerful inspiration as well – one that is a little less blatant than the 1920s mystery scene. “Back in 2019, on a whim, because we just shipped Outer Worlds and I was a bit tired and wanted to do something for myself, I made a Dungeons & Dragons game for my friends who have never played D&D,” Poddar says. “Because they had never played D&D before, I decided to make it a murder mystery.” That D&D campaign then evolved from a simple murder story to being this complicated mass of plot twists and paranoia.

“You have to have a twist,” he adds. “If you’re going to do a murder mystery, it can’t be straightforward, or it will just be unsatisfying.” That philosophy helped drive Murder on Eridanos, pivoting the story at every turn so that players are engaged, intrigued, and hungry to uncover the mystery once and for all, one clue at a time.

One major aspect of this DLC is the pristine Grand Colonial hotel, which acts as a critical focal point for the new tale. Its suspiciously perfect setting and lush gardens are all teeming with workers with obscenely large smiles on their faces and intense pep in their steps. This “how happy is too happy?” design was heavily inspired by Roald Dahl’s Willy Wonka and DC Comics’ Joker characters. “The smiles were key because we wanted to have a visual representation that something wasn’t quite right,” Starks says. “Then you see people puking up parasites, and it just gets weird.”

When developing Murder on Eridanos, no idea, no matter how weird, was off the table. With most games, a lot of ideas never make the final product. Ideas, no matter how grand, can be left on the cutting room floor. While there was one central idea of having a giant Colosseum where the baseball team referenced in the DLC could play that never made the cut, for the most part, creativity took on an “anything goes” route. If it made sense in the story and didn’t take too many resources from the bigger picture, then it was most likely added.



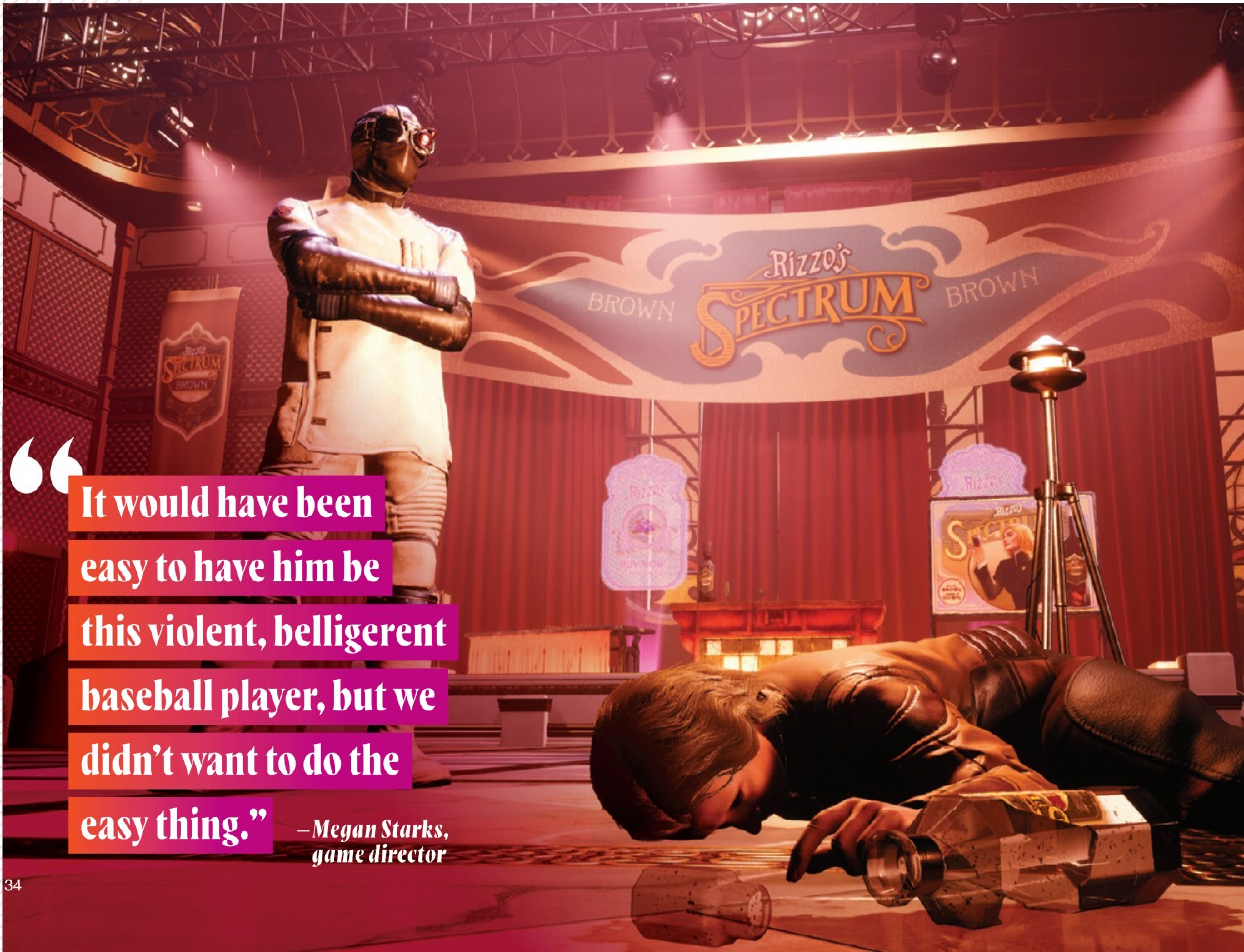
SPENCER WOOLRICH

About time you arrived. I see you haven't dressed the way I asked you to, but I suppose that was expecting too much of a non-industry lout.

From D&D campaigns to "Uncharted meets Han Solo" influences, the mashup of ideas behind Murder of Eridanos is what makes it unique. Nothing was "too weird," not much was off-limits, and both Poddar and Starks glowed when it came to talking about the creative freedom the studio had with this final hurrah. While the bigger picture needed to stay on-theme with the murder mystery's historical influence, the character interactions, areas to explore, and crew reactions all provided the team with a more extensive playground. The boundaries were fluid, and that creative flow is something players will pick up on almost immediately.

There are plenty of new characters in this expansion, such as a washed-up has-been actor, Helen's heartbroken ex-boyfriend, and suspicious corporate overlords. But with new faces come new challenges, and, according to Starks, it was imperative to the team not to go the obvious routes with who the killer could be, especially early on. Because of that, everyone you meet feels simultaneously innocent and guilty. This is especially true with the ex-boyfriend, who the player questions to get his alibi.

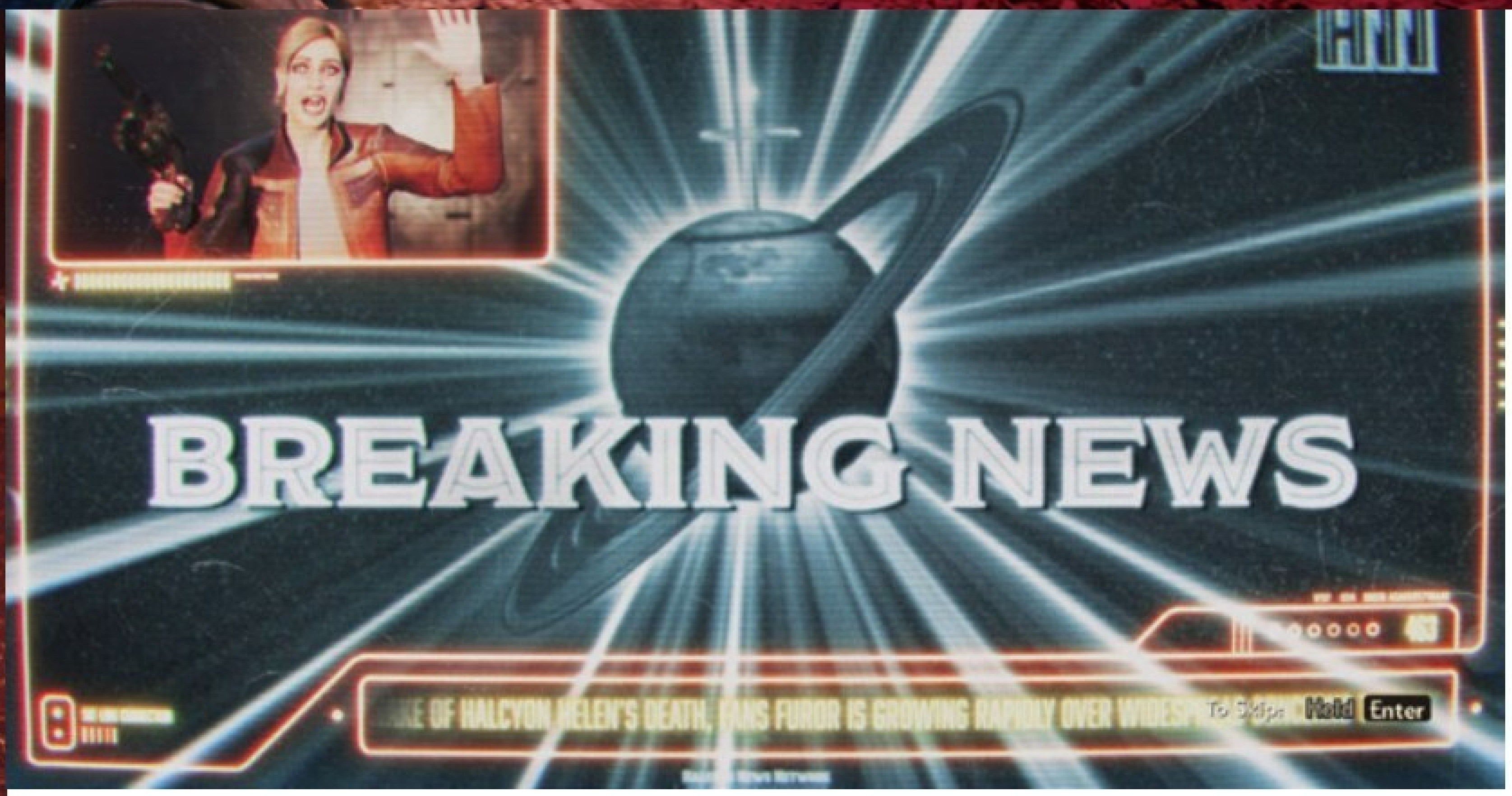
"With her ex-boyfriend, it was really important to me that he actually has genuine feelings and be in love with Helen, and I wanted players to feel his grief," Starks says. "Wondering if he really did it, wondering what his motives could have been, it was all crucial to the story. We were kicking around ideas, like, 'What if Helen found out he was cheating on her,' or talked bad about him, but then we realized that [we] didn't want to do any sort of 'she had it coming' situations. It would have been easy to have him be this violent, belligerent baseball player, but we didn't want to do the easy thing. Instead, you meet him, and he has this grief that you hear through the investigation where he gets blackout drunk. He panics and wonders if he actually did it. Guilt, worry, grief; this character deals with a lot, but at the root of that, it needed to be easy to see a genuine, romantic relationship. He was in love with her."



> "It would have been easy to have him be this violent, belligerent baseball player, but we didn't want to do the easy thing." *–Megan Starks, game director*

> “The one thing I want to say is to play a run with low intelligence. Oh God, please play as a dumb inspector. Imagine hiring the dumbest person in Halcyon to try to figure out who killed the most important star of the house. It’s hilarious.” *–Nitai Poddar, narrative designer*

Rizzo's
SPECTRUM
BROWN


BREAKING NEWS
KE OF HALCYON HELEN'S DEATH, FANS FUROR IS GROWING RAPIDLY OVER WIDESP
To Skip: Hold Enter

With a new story to explore and new faces to meet, what’s one piece of advice that the team has for players getting ready to dive in for the first time? “Go dumb or go home.” No, seriously. “The one thing I want to say is to play a run with low intelligence,” advises Poddar. “Oh God, please play as a dumb inspector. Imagine hiring the dumbest person in Halcyon to try to figure out who killed the most important star of the house. It’s hilarious.”

Starks adds, “It’s so perfect! My favorite thing to do is when they give you the discrepancy amplifier [a new tool that helps uncover clues], and they’re explaining how it works, ‘dumb’ players can’t hear the words the tool is saying. They just hear one garbled sound like they’re not paying attention because their intelligence is so low they can’t comprehend what’s being said.” The pair start laughing when talking about “playing dumb” for this DLC and all the ways that impacts interacting with this new area. It just goes to show the different flavors of Murder on Eridanos and why it’s the perfect send-off for an RPG that feels so thoroughly Obsidian and so uniquely inspired.

From the character designs to the final chapter of Obsidian's latest story, Murder on Eridanos fills in some of the gaps that the base game had. It’s a mystery through and through, keeping true to The Outer Worlds’ aesthetic theme and providing a new tale that makes the end of the road for this title bittersweet. For those ready to solve the mystery themselves, Murder on Eridanos is available now on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC. ◆

TCL
MINI-LED
QLED
TCL

Gaming TVs For Your *New-Gen Console*

Find the right choice on your budget

by Ben Reeves & Matt Miller

You finally managed to snag that new PS5 or Xbox Series X/S, despite all the shortages and scalpers. Congratulations! But if you're still rocking that 1080p TV from 10 years ago, it's time for an upgrade that takes full advantage of the new generation of gaming graphics.

If you'd prefer to shop on your own, consider prioritizing a few key features. 4K is a given, but you should also strongly value HDR support, as both new consoles heavily leverage that technology to offer a wider range of brightness and color. And while it's often a distinguishing feature that moves you into more expensive sets, the option for a 120 Hz refresh rate is also important, as it provides sharper moving images, less screen tearing, and lower input lag. Finally, prioritize your own personal enjoyment of the TV and its picture above all else; an expensive setup isn't worth the cost if you don't like how it actually looks and functions.

Below we highlight three great TVs, each of which aptly supports the latest generation of consoles. We've avoided the lowest tier of budget gaming TVs, as most don't provide performance that comes close to matching the output of the newest consoles. Instead, these televisions are separated by three price tiers, with a commensurate increase in overall quality. However, make no mistake; these are all outstanding displays that should help your new console sing. Match your upgrade to your budget, and enjoy this latest generation of gaming to its fullest.

Good performance,
good price
2
TCL · Roku TV
Home
Featured Free
My Feed
Search
Streaming Channels
Settings
Cable box
Game console
Live TV
NETFLIX
Disney+
tv
hulu
peacock
Roku Channel
1
Won't break
the bank
LG OLED
3
Spare
no expense

❶ TCL 6-SERIES ROKU TV

TCL has made a name for itself by offering stellar displays that match or exceed higher-priced competitors, and the 6-Series is a standout success. This is our top choice if you're gaming on a limited budget, but you still want the vast majority of features that distinguish the new-gen gaming experience.

The 4K display offers rich color and brilliant blacks, often exceeding what you might find in some TVs that cost much more, helping artful games like Ghost of Tsushima soar to new heights. The 6-Series' excellent HDR performance helps the newest games shine, and is only likely to be outstripped if you push up into a dedicated OLED display. The QLED panel offers plenty of brightness, and combines with hundreds of mini-LED backlights to create a remarkably consistent and beautiful image across the whole screen. The THX Certified Gaming Mode is a handy preset option that helps ensure a good play experience, even if you're not a tech wizard.

Some very minor motion blur issues aren't enough to dissuade a purchase. One notable sacrifice that you make at the price point? The 6-Series supports 120 Hz, but not at 4K. Especially discerning gamers might be frustrated.

The form factor isn't flashy, but the thin outer bezels adequately frame the screen. The stand can be mounted in an alternate position for smaller surfaces, and includes some handy cable management. Not to be overlooked, the included Roku functionality is one of the better and more navigable smart user interfaces out there. Even with some limitations, this is a remarkable TV for the money, and an easy choice to consider if the gaming console you just bought already drained a big chunk of your luxury spending for the year.

55", 65" ($999), 75" | tcl.com

❷ SAMSUNG Q80T 4K QLED

Samsung has always been a great television manufacturer. The company sells a premium 4K TV called the Q90T, but its "second-tier" model, the Q80T, has phenomenal screen quality and nearly as many bells and whistles, making it a great option if you want a quality TV that won't destroy your budget.

The Q80T features a nice thin border and an overall aesthetically pleasing design. Its single stand gives the set a nice small footprint, but it also means the whole set wobbles a bit if you bump into the table. However, the most important element of any TV is its display, and here the Q80T doesn't disappoint. Samsung's Quantum Dot technology offers a wide variety of color complexity and deep rich blacks. Images remain crisp even in motion, so Spider-Man: Miles Morales' version of New York has never looked better. The Q80T's display is also incredibly vibrant thanks to Samsung's Quantum HDR feature, which outputs images that look good even in direct sunlight.

Sadly, the Q80T lacks built-in Dolby Atmos support, but the system's Object Tracking Sound technology pays attention to the on-screen action and boosts your audio to match, which makes up for that. Overall, Samsung has built an impressive 4K set that doesn't compromise on much.

50", 55", 65" ($1,699), 75", 85" | samsung.com

❸ LG CX 4K OLED

LG has long been one of the best TV manufacturers in the business and the CX is a testament to that expertise. Not only does the CX look impossibly thin, but it feels sturdy and well-built. Even when the display is off, LG's set looks great thanks to an extra-wide stand.

OLED screens are known to offer the best picture quality because they can produce perfectly dark blacks and deliver high color contrasts, and the CX has one of the best OLED screens on the market. Pair the CX's deep blacks with its high dynamic range lighting and you have a display that really pops. Our jaw nearly hit the floor during a return visit to medieval England in Assassin's Creed Valhalla when we saw the range of vibrant colors on display in Ubisoft's historical open world. However, one of the biggest boons for gamers is the CX's built-in Nvidia G-Sync technology, which amplifies the screen's range of colors while smoothing out the action. Games look great in motion even when cranked up to 60fps, and the CX's near-instant response time makes this a great choice for games like Demon's Souls.

The CX also sports impressively wide viewing angles; even from the sides of our room, the picture quality didn't drop much. And while the CX's built-in speakers don't produce deep, rumbly bass (true of most TV speakers), they do offer a nice range of crystal-clear audio. Be aware that burn-in can be an issue with some OLEDs for long-sitting images like HUD displays, but in our time with the CX, we had no such problems. If you need the best TV on the market for your new consoles, you don't need to look any further. ◆

48", 55", 65" ($1,999), 77" | lg.com

A WEREWOLF AT THE DOOR

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Capcom

» DEVELOPER
Capcom

» RELEASE
May 7

How Resident Evil 4 inspired Capcom to take the action up a notch in Village

By Ben Reeves

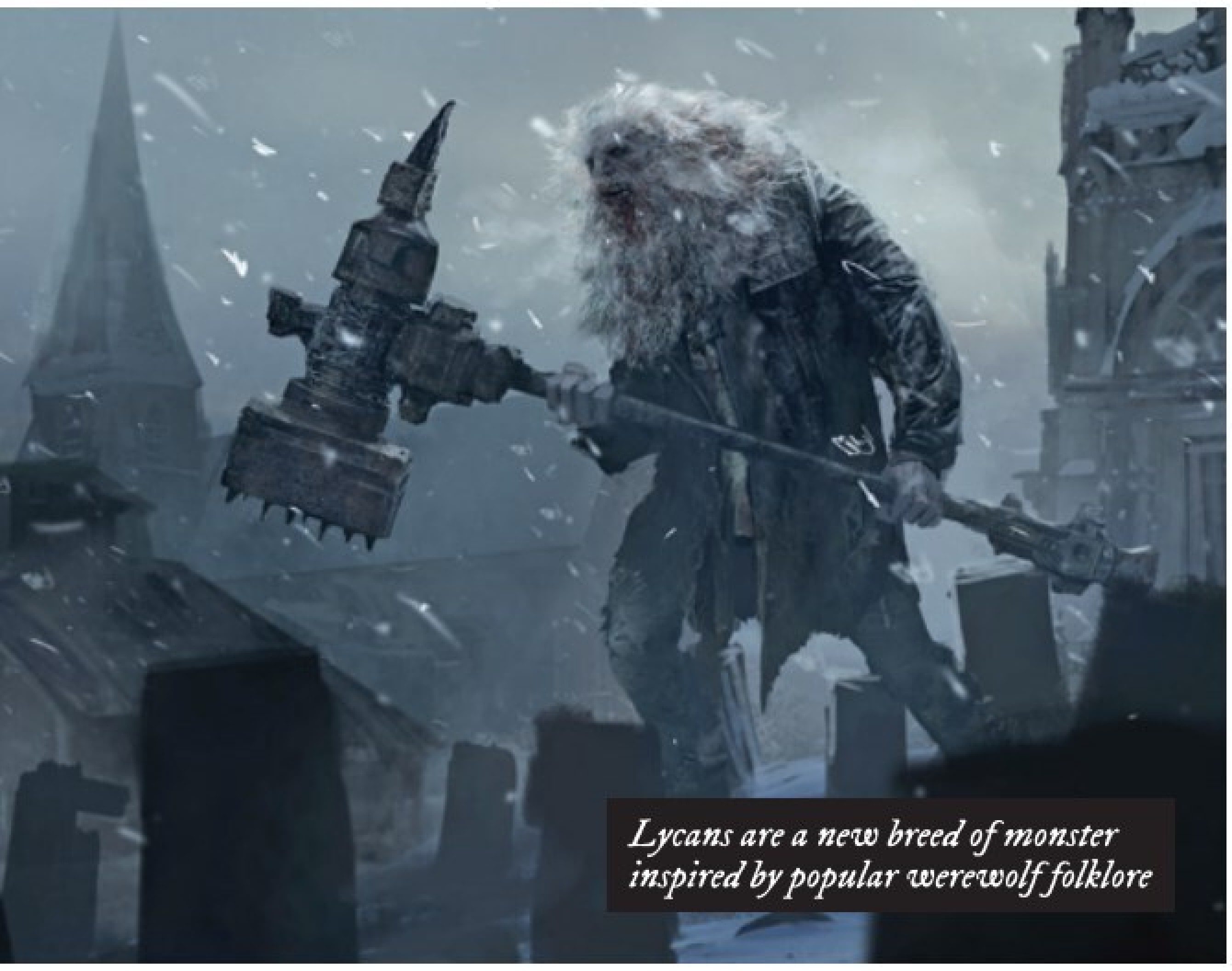
AS ETHAN WINTERS ENTERS THE VILLAGE, A SMALL VOICE IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND WARNS HIM OF IMPENDING DANGER.

He ignores it. Days ago, a group of armed men broke into his house, killed his wife, and abducted his infant daughter. After Ethan escaped, he followed their bloody trail to a no-name Eastern European village on the edge of the civilized world. But Ethan doesn't care where he has to go – or who he has to go through. He'll do whatever it takes to rescue his daughter.

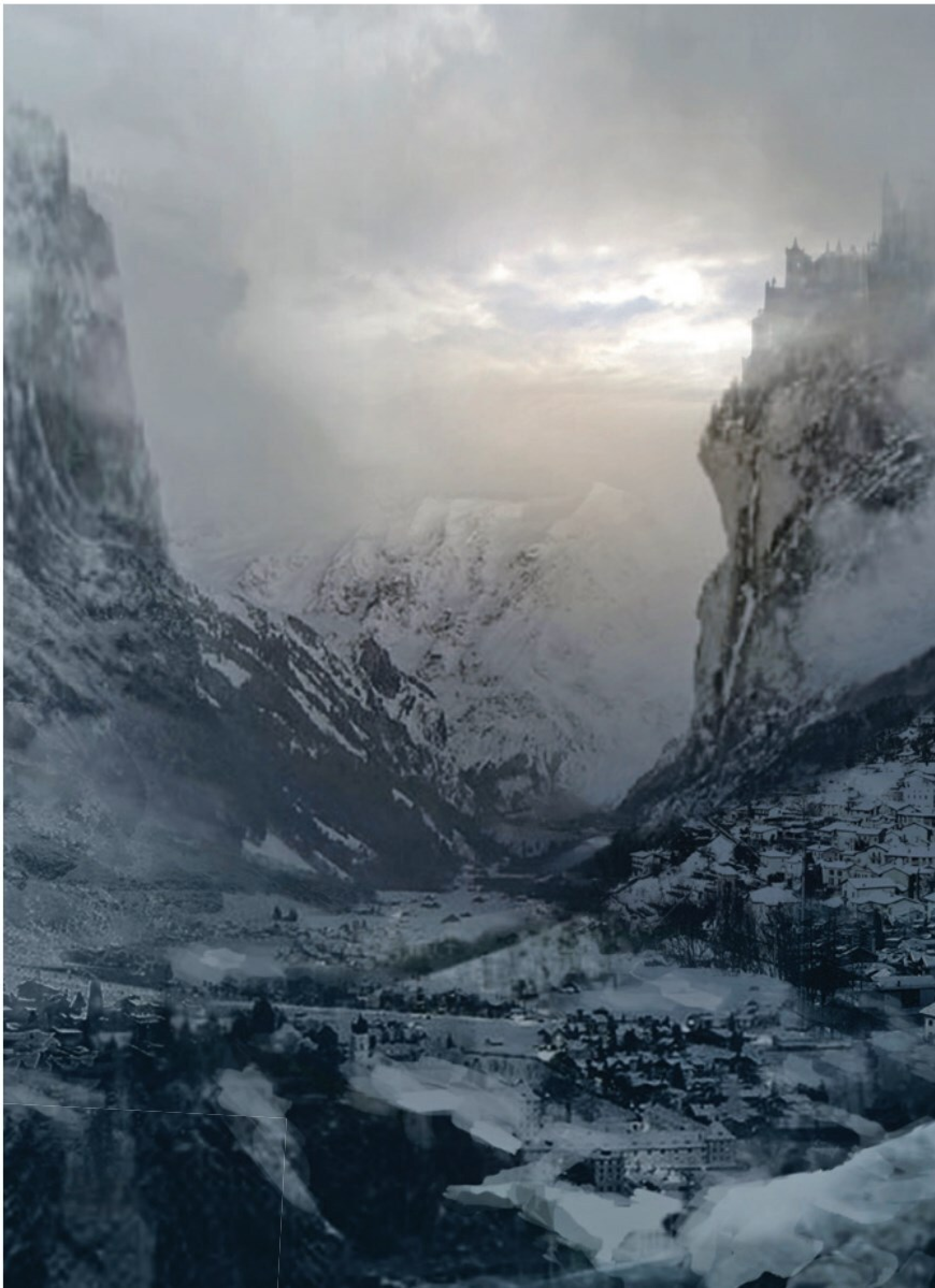
The voice in the back of Ethan's mind nudges him again, but he's more focused on his surroundings. He steps over the carcass of a dead horse and curves down a dusty dirt road. A gust of wind sends billows of snow rolling down a hill. The houses in this part of town look ready to collapse, and Ethan hasn't seen another living soul for a long time. However, every now and then, he catches a sign of recent activity: a crushed basket of eggs on the side of the road, a half-loaded wheelbarrow full of hay, a trail of blood leading down a walkway and into a nearby home. He looks up and sees decapitated goat heads hanging from a tree like Christmas ornaments. Ethan's familiar with Hell's stink, and this God-forsaken village smells like brimstone.

He turns a corner and something stops him in his tracks. Atop a nearby building, a hairy beast sits hunched over the edge of the roof. The voice at the back of Ethan's head chimes in, but he is too busy inspecting the creature to listen. The beast's eyes are cold and unflinching. Its matted fur juts in all directions. And its razer-sharp incisors frame an extra-wide smile. Ever so slowly, the creature begins to stand. That's when Ethan realizes this monster is wearing farmers' clothing.

This beast isn't an animal. It's a man. The voice at the back of his head screams, "Run!"



Lycans are a new breed of monster inspired by popular werewolf folklore



A HORRIFYING HISTORY

During its long history, the Resident Evil franchise has faced an identity issue, fluctuating from shlocky horror to explosive set-piece action to intense psychological terror. The series' wild tonal swings left some fans hot and cold, but over the last few years, Capcom has worked to maintain a consistent level of quality and bring the series back to its survival horror roots. Resident Evil Village is the culmination of that multi-year journey. But Capcom hopes Village conveys more than intense horror, which is why the studio is crafting a refined action experience that draws inspiration from one of the most beloved entries in the series' history.

In 2005, Capcom took the franchise back to the drawing board with Resident Evil 4. Until that point, the series was known for its deliberate pacing, tight resource management, and somewhat outdated tank controls. That blueprint worked brilliantly in the '90s, but by the turn of the new millennium, the formula had grown old. Resident Evil needed fresh ideas, and Resident Evil 4's over-the-shoulder camera perspective and renewed focus on action reinvigorated the series. Not only did Resident Evil 4 become one of the most critically praised entries in the series, it's often regarded as one of the best action games of all time. That success is something Capcom hopes it can replicate with Village.

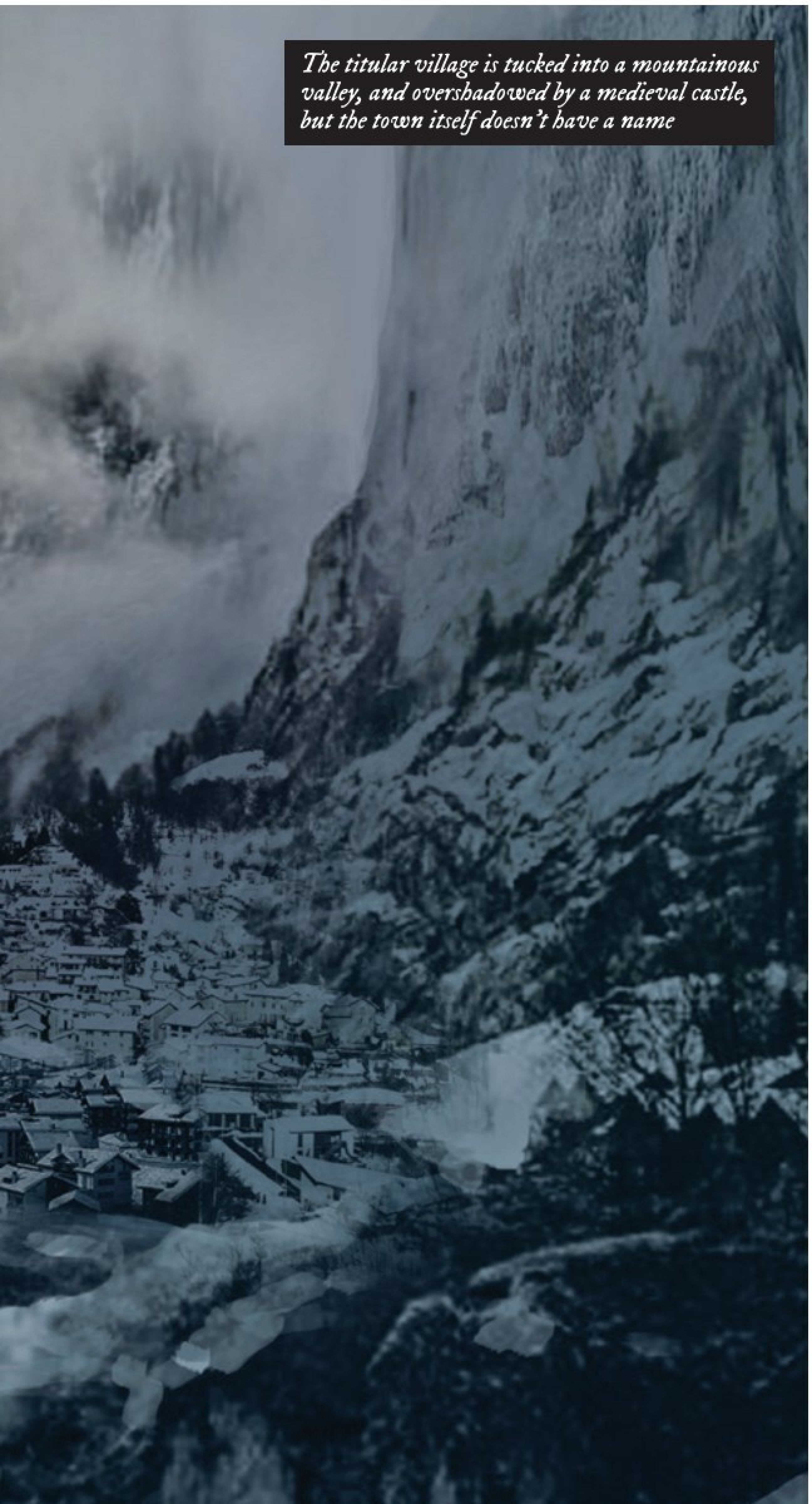
"When we began developing Resident Evil 7, the initial concept was honoring and respecting the very first Resident Evil and using that as a basis to build a brand-new sense of survival horror," says director Morimasa Sato. "Resident Evil Village is going in that same direction, but this time we are respecting and honoring what Resident Evil 4 did to the industry and the franchise as a whole … Resident Evil 4 was a game about horror and action, but it was just fun in general. It's a game I go back to and still play. It blends horror and action really well. For me, that's very inspirational."

The closer you look, the more apparent Resident Evil 4's influence on Village becomes. Some of these inspirations are obvious, such as the return of a shopkeeper who sells Ethan items, weapons, and upgrades. Another clear nod is how Ethan plays Tetris with his inventory, twisting and sliding his gear so it fits inside a limited grid. However, longtime fans will also notice callbacks to beloved moments from Resident Evil 4. For example, early in Village, Ethan finds himself surrounded by a group of monsters who suddenly run off when a bell rings in the distance.

Newcomers who haven't played Resident Evil 4 won't feel completely lost, however. Village isn't a casual collection of Resident Evil 4 Easter eggs; it's a direct sequel to Resident Evil 7 and it maintains that horrifying first-person perspective. Capcom rarely focuses on the same protagonist in back-to-back entries, but the Resident Evil team felt that Ethan Winters' journey wasn't finished. In Resident Evil 7, this everyman hero worked his way through a derelict country estate in Louisiana to rescue his missing wife, Mia. While players spent a lot of time with Ethan over the course of that game, Capcom knows it didn't fully flesh out his character.

"Ethan was positioned like the player camera, like the player was him, so we didn't inject as much personality into him as we normally would," Sato says. "But after we finished development of Resident Evil 7, we were drawn to him and had an attachment to him. A lot of the dev team was talking, 'Okay, what's going to happen to this character?' So, it made sense to stick with him and position this as the finale of his story … This time, we emphasized the fact that he's now a father figure. Ethan has a daughter named Rose, and he's out to do what any dad would do."

Unfortunately, this dad is about to find out that in order to protect his family, he's going to have to go toe-to-toe with a pack of hungry werewolves.


The titular village is tucked into a mountainous valley, and overshadowed by a medieval castle, but the town itself doesn't have a name

SEEING REDFIELD

Chris Redfield is one of Resident Evil's biggest mainstays. He was one of the original survivors of the zombie outbreak in Raccoon City (as detailed in the first Resident Evil), and he has since traveled the globe fighting the spread of various bioweapons. Fans last caught up with Chris in Resident Evil 7's Not a Hero DLC. During that story, Chris worked for the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance; he was an agent sent to rescue a group of missing soldiers from the salt mines in Dulvey Parish, Louisiana. However, since then, Chris seems to have gone through some major ordeals, which will be detailed in Village.

In early Resident Evil Village trailers, Chris is seen killing Ethan's wife, Mia, and helping kidnap his daughter, Rose. These moments clearly paint Chris in a sinister light and have left many fans wondering if Chris has finally fallen off the deep end, or if he's just doing some questionable things for the greater good.

"He definitely plays a very significant role in this game," says director Morimasa Sato. "One of the big mysteries, as you play through the game is, 'Why did he do all that?' He has a pivotal role in one of the major mysteries in the game. It's one of those things where we want to see the character grow … But we will say that this title taps into the dark side of Chris Redfield."

A WOLF IN CREEP'S CLOTHING

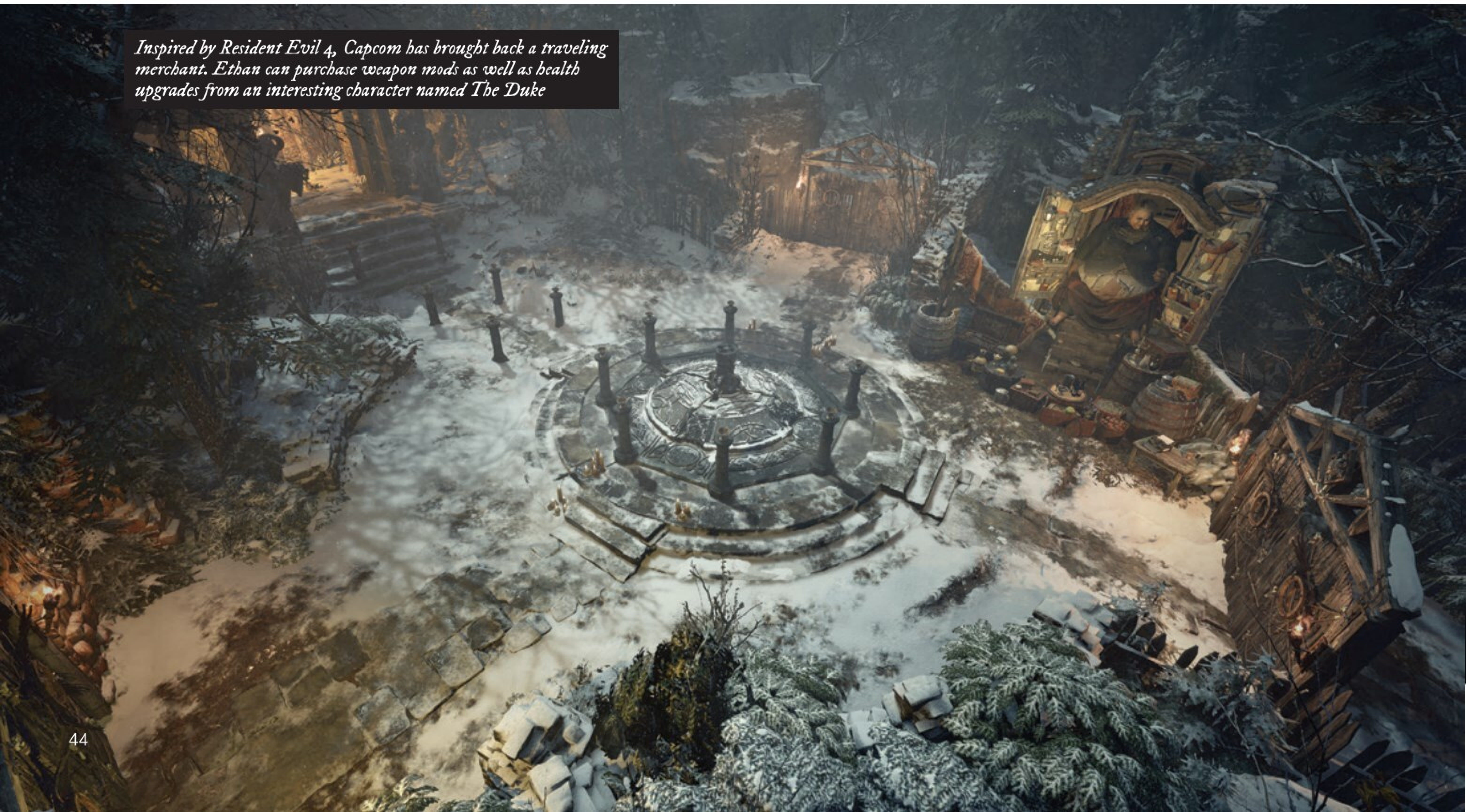
After his wife's murder and daughter's kidnapping, Ethan winds up in the rustic village that gives this game its name. The village itself doesn't have a name, however, which was a purposeful decision intended to imbue the location with an added sense of mystery. Its design was inspired by Eastern European countries like Romania, but Capcom also wanted this town to feel like a corner of the world that time forgot; it has small huts and cottages, and sits in the shadow of an ornate medieval castle. Ethan's journey will thoroughly cover both locations, but Capcom teased that players can explore many other locales that haven't been shown yet.

"The concept was, 'a beautiful yet terrifying locale,'" says art director Tomonori Takano. "During the development of Resident Evil 7, my objective was to forget what we'd done in previous games and make a game that was as grotesque as possible. So [with Village], it was a pleasure to broaden my horizon and make things that stand out from an aesthetically pleasing perspective, but the approach is still the same. What we've shown thus far is more beautiful, but as you play the game, you'll definitely notice a lot of grotesque moments. My approach in that regard has not changed."

"With Resident Evil 7, the objective was to create the ultimate horror experience, so it was like, 'Okay, where do we go from there?'" Sato adds. "Resident Evil 7 was more of a confined space with a lot of depth. With Village, I was like, 'Let's take that horror and let's broaden it, make it wider.' It's all about the adrenaline-pumping action, kind of mixing and matching action and horror together … In the R&D development gray box setting, there was a lot of trial-and-error figuring out what worked within these larger environments."

Capcom ultimately discovered that larger play spaces allowed the team to design combat encounters with greater strategic depth. Now that Ethan can more easily run from the dangers that surround him, players are encouraged to seek out the most defensible positions. Capcom even designed these spaces with extra verticality. For example, Ethan can climb onto the roofs of many buildings to put extra distance between him and his foes. Additionally, he can push some enemies off elevated platforms to defeat them.

Resident Evil Village's new enemies are nimbler than the traditional zombie, which makes them better at navigating large spaces. These creatures intently encroach on Ethan's position, making it hard to hunker down in one spot for long. In early trailers, we glimpsed these new werewolf enemies, called Lycans, and these monsters are a big focus in Village. Like actual wolves, they hunt in packs and their fluid movements make them hard to pin down. Lycans can even clamber up the sides of buildings or bound across open fields in the blink of an eye.



Inspired by Resident Evil 4, Capcom has brought back a traveling merchant. Ethan can purchase weapon mods as well as health upgrades from an interesting character named The Duke

"Their concept spawned from the fact that we wanted to create an enemy that represented the village," Sato says. "They are this twisted outcome of a human being, but we drew a lot of inspiration from werewolves and tapped into that gothic horror visual … It just so happens that they're hunting Ethan Winters. As Ethan, it's all about figuring out how to fend them off, not just in single numbers but when they're surrounding from all different areas."

We watch these Lycans put their hunting skills to the test as a group stalks Ethan through a field of grain. As he makes his way deeper into the village, he gets trapped out in the open. Ethan watches two Lycans enter the field, but the large amber stalks easily mask their exact location. Like snakes in the grass, these monsters slowly encircle him. Ethan blindly fires into the grain, hoping to slow their approach, but a face-to-face confrontation is inevitable. One creature breaks through the grain and swings for Ethan's head. He holds up his hands to block the attack, reducing some of its damage, then takes aim at a nearby bag of flour and sends a cloud of white dust into the air. Players should keep an eye out for interactive elements such as these, which may give them an upper hand in combat. Enveloped by a cloud of dust, the Lycan reels back, rubbing flour from its eyes. This is Ethan's chance to make a break for it.

He races through the front door of a nearby building as a beast lunges for his throat. Ethan spins and slides a shelf across the doorway just in time. The Lycan's claws thunk into the dry wood and the beast howls. It won't take long for the human hound to chew through that barricade, so Ethan starts working his way through the house, looking for another exit. Like most Resident Evil games, health and ammo are limited resources, so it is often better to avoid a full confrontation. If Ethan is careful, he can sneak past some of these monsters, but his footsteps (or any other noise he makes) will reveal his presence.

Inside the house, Ethan finds a container of gunpowder, which he can use to make more ammunition. He smashes a nearby crate and finds a bottle of meds. He could use these now or save them for the next Lycan attack. A second later, Ethan hears a beast scamper across the roof, and he knows he's running out of time. He decides to save this bottle of meds for later.

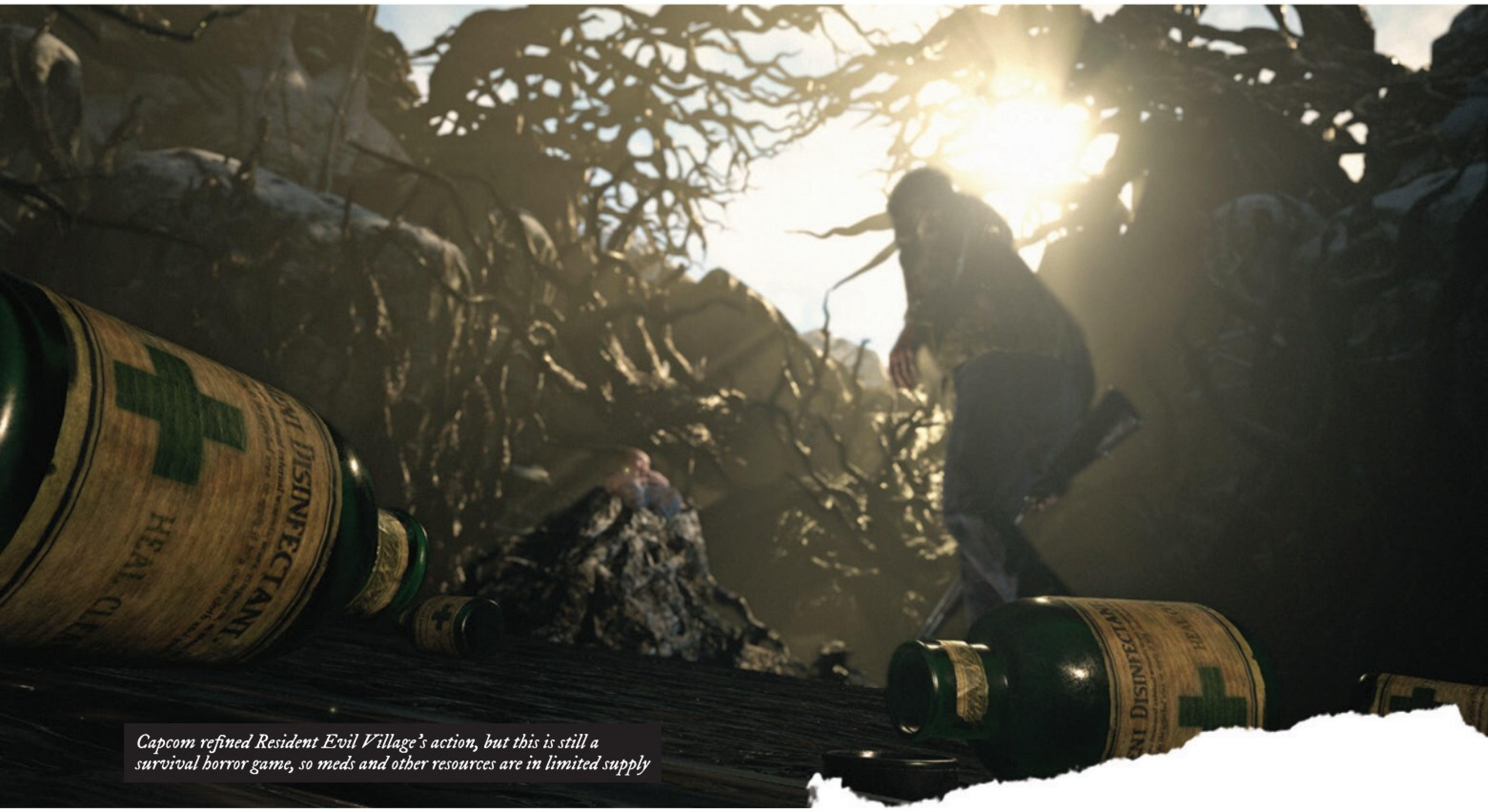
Synthetic Oil

DESIGNING LADY DIMITRESCU

Even if you aren't tapped into all of Resident Evil Village's marketing beats, you're probably familiar with with Lady Dimitrescu, the tall vampire who antagonizes Ethan during his search for his daughter. The internet fell in love with this large lady after she was revealed in an early Resident Evil Village trailer, and Capcom was thrilled to see fans respond so strongly.

"The design of Dimitrescu was going off a vampiric motif," says art director Tomonori Takano. "But obviously, if we had just gone straight in that direction, it would be very stereotypical. We wanted to make sure we created something more memorable. Talking with other team members we tried to figure out what was going to make her stand out, like the changes in height. Talking about clothing as well, if it was just straight-up Gothic clothing, that would be forgettable as well, so we modified it so it stands out a little bit. As with the village, we wanted to make sure she had some level of believability, but was memorable."

We still don't know much about Village's towering vampiress, but Capcom has confirmed that she stands nine-feet and six-inches tall, and her full name is Alcina Dimitrescu. She lives in Castle Dimitrescu, which sits on a hill overlooking the village, and she shares this citadel with three other vampiric women. Dimitrescu has referred to these other women as her "daughters," but we're not entirely sure they're biologically related.



Capcom refined Resident Evil Village's action, but this is still a survival horror game, so meds and other resources are in limited supply

HOW CAPCOM CREATES HORROR

Capcom believes that Resident Evil 7's switch to a first-person camera helped the series achieve new heights in horror. Many fans agree that Resident Evil 7 is one of the scariest games in the series, but some felt it was actually too scary. Capcom isn't out to make Village any less fright-filled, but the team believes that it has found a better balance between the action and the horror that helps alleviate some of the overwhelming tension players felt when playing Resident Evil 7.

"If you make the player encounter a scary monster that in itself is scary, I feel like that's not enough," says director Morimasa Sato. "You have to tap into their imagination and work with their anticipation and build towards that scary moment. Sometimes you actually betray that anticipation. I think that's a key element to horror. We want to hit that balance between progressing further but also being scared to progress further. We call it the tension curve, figuring out how to make things tense without letting players grow numb to that tension."

To date, we've seen the village and medieval castle settings, but those areas are only a small part of Village's overall story

SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

As Ethan works his way through this decaying village, he'll encounter a few living creatures who aren't out to kill him – namely, a handful of domesticated chickens, pigs, fish, and a scattering of other critters. These animals make the world feel more active and alive, but they also serve a practical purpose. For the first time in the series, Ethan can hunt animals and collect their meat. This raw flesh doesn't look very appetizing, but after Ethan delivers his spoils to the shopkeeper, he can cook up a variety of dishes that permanently upgrade his health, improve the strength of his guard, and increase his overall movement speed.

At the shopkeeper, Ethan can also trade in the rusted scrap and other valuables he discovers in the environment or loots from fallen foes. This money can be used to purchase more ammo and other supplies, but it might be even more useful for improving Ethan's collection of weapons. Ethan's guns can be upgraded in one of two ways: he can pay the shopkeeper directly to improve a weapon's firepower and reload speed, or he can purchase mods that offer additional benefits. For example, a cheek rest for the F2 Rifle reduces the weapon's sway while aiming. The M1897 shotgun's hair trigger improves its rate of fire. A high-capacity mag allows Ethan to load more ammo into his handgun. After a few trips to the shopkeeper, Ethan should be loaded for bear and ready to tackle a full pack of Lycans.

"We have definitely placed an emphasis on combat, but at the same time, we don't want to give the misunderstanding that that's taking away from other Resident Evil elements," Sato says. "We're pouring just as much effort into the puzzles, and personally I feel that the puzzle elements here are just as strong, if not stronger, than previous entries … One of the things we always focused on was making sure that the puzzles act as an additional piece to the overall stage. We didn't want a logic puzzle to feel like it was dropped into an area without feeling integrated into the rest of the world."

When we asked the team if it could offer an example of the kinds of puzzles players would encounter in Village, the developers hesitated to share any details that would spoil the experience. "Any Resident Evil fan will easily recognize the crank, so the crank is back," Sato laughs. "That's just an example of one of the items you will pick up throughout the map and utilize to progress further, so that sense of exploration is still there. On the whole, we're always focusing on horror, combat, resource management, and that sense of puzzle-solving and exploration."

BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

These days, some of the most exciting horror games originate from the indie scene. If you look back at the most influential horror games of the last decade the list is full of indie darlings like Soma, Five Nights At Freddy's, Visage, and Inside. Big publishers like EA and Konami have all but abandoned their big-budget horror franchises like Dead Space and Silent Hill, respectively. This makes Resident Evil Village something of an anomaly; it's a big-budget title from a large publisher … and it looks terrifying.

"I think the horror genre is a very unique genre," producer Tsuyoshi Kanda says. "It does divide your audience pretty heavily. I mean, you either love horror or you shy away from it, so I think when you attempt to make a game in the horror genre, it is very challenging, you're already working with a very divided audience. When you look at our franchise, you look at the Resident Evil series, one of our big challenges is to take that horror genre and make it appeal to a larger audience, to make a form of entertainment that's appealing to anybody. I think one of the reasons that you don't see triple-A horror titles that much is because there is that challenge inherently built into the genre itself."

To overcome those challenges, Resident Evil needs to continue to innovate. No one understands this better than Capcom. The studio has noticed a trend in its development of the series: Around every third mainline entry, Resident Evil goes through a dramatic rebirth. The original Resident Evil kicked off the campy survival horror series as players explored intimate, intricately designed spaces. Resident Evil 4 took the franchise in a more action-focused direction that featured bigger play spaces. Finally, Resident Evil 7 moved the series into first-person in an attempt to amplify the horror.

Resident Evil Village builds off everything Capcom did with Resident Evil 7. At the same time, the team rethought its approach to combat, allowing Ethan to gear up in new ways as it pulls action inspirations from Resident Evil 4. Unlike Resident Evil 6, which focused on action at the expense of horror, Resident Evil Village uses tense combat encounters to turn up the terror. If Capcom can nail that delicate balance, the studio might appease multiple generations of Resident Evil fans. At the very least, this should be one village vacation we'll never forget. ◆

For more on Resident Evil Village head over to www.gameinformer.com/village to see some of our exclusive interviews with the development team, including a deeper look at hunting animals and upgrading weapons

LOOKING BACK AT 25 YEARS OF RESIDENT EVIL

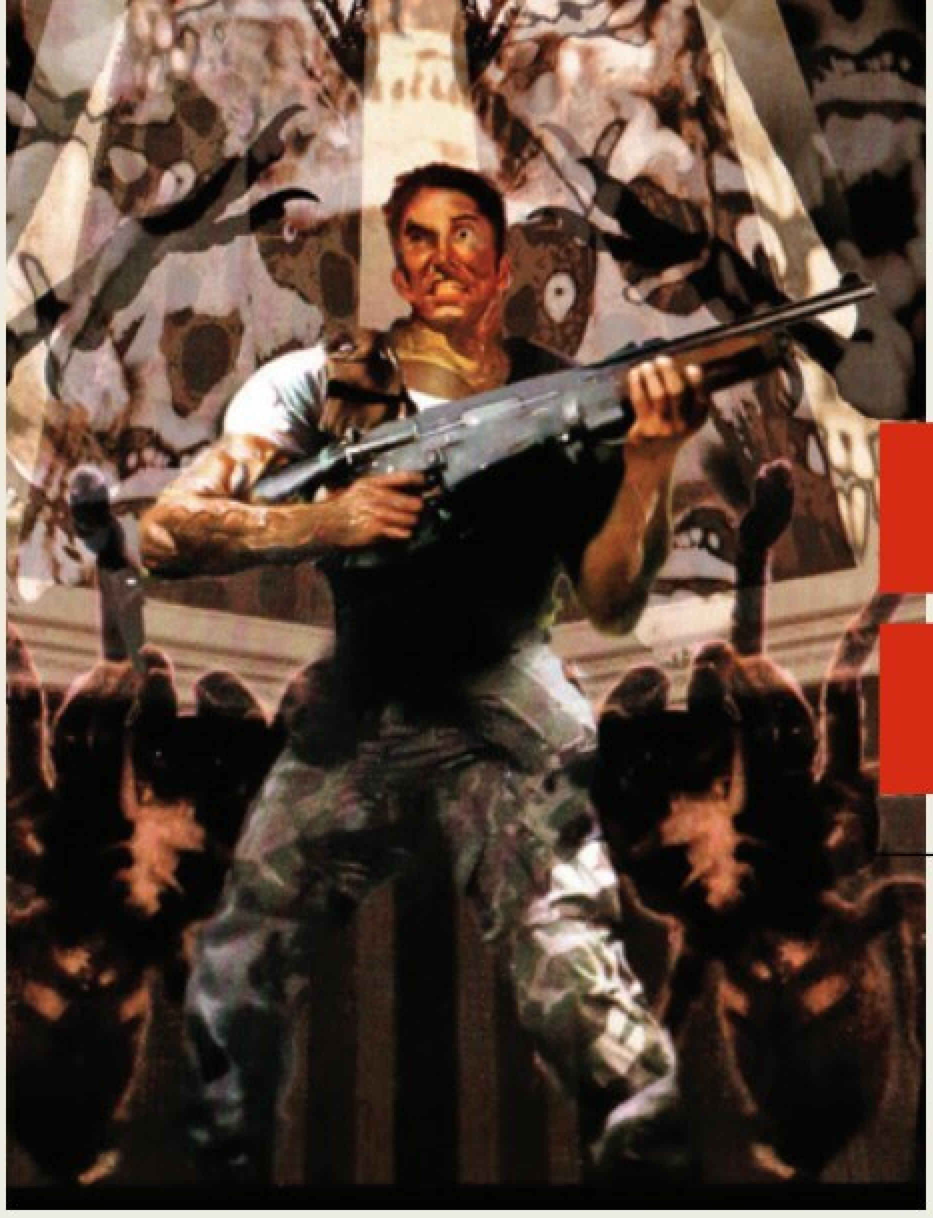
We looked at four of the most important Resident Evil games and their impacts on the series – both good and bad

By Blake Hester

The Resident Evil series has always been about starting over and trying again, whether that be the first game helping establish survival horror, Resident Evil 4 reinventing the third-person shooter and pushing the gameplay towards action, or Resident Evil 7: Biohazard moving the series into first-person and towards more intimate scares. Not to mention the full-fledged remakes the first three Resident Evil games received, updating them for modern sensibilities. Multiple times, when the series formula got stale, developer-publisher Capcom has gone back to the drawing board, reassessing what it means to be a Resident Evil game.

Few games have had the impact on pop culture that the Resident Evil series has. Numerous individual entries have completely reshaped the game industry and how games are designed. The movie series it birthed, which ran for six films across more than 10 years, made over a billion dollars in box-office revenue. No matter how you slice it, Resident Evil is a big deal. Always changing the world. Always starting over. Always trying something new.

To celebrate Resident Evil's 25th anniversary, we wanted to look back at the series, highlighting the most important entries that have come out to date. In doing so, we explored the conditions that led to their development, their initial impact, and what their legacies meant for the broader series – both good and bad. This is nowhere near a comprehensive list, but rather a hand-selection of which Resident Evil games have meant the most for the franchise.



RESIDENT EVIL

Resident Evil didn't invent horror games. In fact, in some ways, the first Resident Evil was Capcom recycling some older ideas. As the story goes, the earliest conversations around the series began when Capcom producer Tokuro Fujiwara approached Shinji Mikami to make a horror game using systems designed for Sweet Home – a game Fujiwara directed in 1989, released in tandem with a movie of the same name, directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa. These systems included environmental puzzles, item management and limited inventory, and even door animations for loading screens. The game's setting, a mansion, was also lifted for Mikami's new project, which he'd direct with Fujiwara serving as producer.

Interestingly, Mikami's said in the past that when developing the first Resident Evil, he tried to free himself of pre-established genres. Because he feared how a horror game might sell, he wanted to make a game that wasn't normal. By all estimations, this was a gamble. Resident Evil, telling a story about a police unit trapped in a labyrinthine mansion full of zombies and other awful creatures, combines a hodgepodge of different elements and influences – all the way from Sweet Home to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* to meticulous puzzle design – making, at the time, a game unlike much else on the market. It also introduced characters that would become series staples, and arguably some of the most popular in video games, including Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine, Albert Wesker, and Barry Burton.

Viewing the game with 2021 sensibilities, a lot of these design decisions – despite their lasting impact – make little sense. Not to say they did in 1996 either, but there were fewer questions asked back then. The game's setting, Spencer Mansion, is a convoluted fortress full of not only zombies but impossibly large snakes and sharks for seemingly no other reason than they're scary. The puzzles, obtuse and challenging in sometimes satisfying ways, never matched the narrative. The prerendered backgrounds and fixed-camera perspectives (inspired by the first Alone in the Dark game) were a result of technical limitations but did inadvertently add to Resident Evil's unique visual framing. Fixed-cameras would be a staple of the series all the way until Resident Evil 4.

So, while it wasn't the very first horror game, what Resident Evil did invent – or at least popularize – was the idea of survival horror as a video game genre. While Sweet Home was certainly influential, Resident Evil took Fujiwara's ideas and made them appealing to a mainstream audience. It proved that video games were not only an effective medium for horror, but also a medium people wanted to experience horror in. According to Capcom, the original release of Resident Evil on the PlayStation has sold more than 2.75 million copies, not factoring in ports, the Director's Cut, and various other editions of the game. It also launched Resident Evil as a multimedia franchise – a big one, at that. Since its release in 1996, across 141 different titles (mainline sequels, ports, remakes, etc.), the Resident Evil series has sold more than 107 million units.

More profoundly, Resident Evil inspired some of the greatest games ever made. There would likely be no Silent Hill, Fatal Frame, or Dead Space without the framework of the original Resident Evil. In the video game world at least, it launched Mikami into stardom, which his later work in the series would help solidify.

And yet, for the man who dreamed it all up, his feelings come across conflicted.

"During the time when we were making it, my personal feeling was that Resident Evil was not a game that should be made into a series," Mikami told *GameSpot* in 2016. "This is because horror tends to have strong patterns that are easy to get used to, meaning they're easy to get tired of. I never thought that the game would become such a huge hit.

"I can't help thinking that, if Resident Evil hadn't sold so well, maybe I could have spent that period of my 30s doing creative work as a studio director instead of working as a producer. Although I still feel like a very lucky man to be able to have those kinds of worries."

Whether or not he wanted it, Resident Evil obviously did become a series. And the formula established in the first game would serve future installments well. Until it didn't. Eventually, enough sequels later, what was groundbreaking in the first Resident Evil became trite and predictable. And so Capcom went back to the drawing board, to reinvent the genre it helped invent in the first place.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

If you've played video games at any point in the last 15 years, you've felt the impact of Resident Evil 4. It's one of the most influential games of all time.

But Resident Evil 4's development was troubled, and in fact, the finished product is the fifth attempt at making the game happen that the public knows about. Development originally began in 1999, following the release of Resident Evil 3: Nemesis, but despite several directors trying their hands at different ways to make it, nothing stuck until Mikami came on board a few years later. While games like Resident Evil 2 and 3 and Code Veronica were well received (and have remained fan favorites), by that point, the Resident Evil formula was exactly that: formulaic. Capcom developers, like Mikami, were feeling this, too. Speaking to *Game Informer* in 2004, the developer cited Resident Evil 0, released in 2002, as his personal breaking point.

"I remember playing [Resident Evil 0] and saying to myself that this is just more of the same," Mikami said. "This is why I wanted to change the system. With the new system, I once again feel nervous and scared when I play it."

Resident Evil 4 stands as an inflection point for the series. On the one hand, it marks the first major changes for Resident Evil. Zombies, technically, are gone, replaced with the undead Ganados, who still shamble around but also possess the ability to communicate with each other and use weapons. The T-Virus, the reason everyone is a zombie in previous entries, is replaced by the Las Plagas – a parasite that takes over the host's body, turning them homicidal and easy-to-control, and even ejecting from the host as needed to protect itself from danger.

The biggest change in Resident Evil 4 is its gameplay and how it is presented to the player. Where the first Resident Evil adopted fixed camera angles out of technical limitations, which later games also embraced since it became a series

staple, Resident Evil 4 put the camera behind the back of protagonist Leon Kennedy, giving players more freedom to look around the environment when exploring or aiming. Leon is also placed off center to the left during gameplay, allowing players to look over his shoulder while aiming. This is, of course, the standard camera perspective for all third-person shooters at this point. But at the time, this was a novel concept and not a proven formula. In our Resident Evil 4 cover story from 2004, former editor-in-chief Andy McNamara remarked at how responsive the camera perspective was when aiming.

"When in third person, Leon fills the far left side of the screen, which we thought would make aiming nearly impossible until we actually got our hands on the title," McNamara wrote. "The game really feels like you are playing a first-person shooter, with or without Leon on screen."

It's worth pointing out that Resident Evil: Dead Aim, released in 2003, also featured a behind-the-back camera perspective, making it the first in the series to do so, without fixed camera angles. However, the main character was centered on screen (customary for the time) and its aiming system was set in first-person. It also featured full 3D environments.

Resident Evil 4 also started to move the series away from typical survival horror toward action. While a lot of the standard Resident Evil trappings are still in the game – such as inventory management, low ammo, and the fact it can be scary at times – the back half leans much further into set-pieces and large-scale action.

This move, by and large, works for Resident Evil 4, if only evident by the number of times the game shows up on "greatest games of all time" lists. However, it's undeniable the negative ramifications this move had on the broader series – and how, once again, it'd lead to another reinvention a decade later. There's a safe argument to be made that Resident Evil 4 was too good at what it does, balancing horror and action in a way that gave Capcom the wrong ideas in where to take later games. Resident Evil 5 and certainly Resident Evil 6 largely abandoned horror for action. And while those games aren't without their merits, eventually the definition of a Resident Evil game became nebulous. Resident Evil was a survival-horror series historically, but now it was also an action series, and there were multiplayer shooters coming out as well. It was a lot of things at once, very few of which were making anyone happy.

This makes Resident Evil 4 an interesting game from a historical perspective. On the one hand, even playing in 2021, it's fantastic. It still controls remarkably well, has effective scares, and the action is exciting. Mikami's gamble was not only successful for the time but made a fairly timeless video game. On the other hand, with hindsight, you can see the ways in which it nearly tanked the entire series – or at least fan opinion of it. While you could argue the spin-offs Resident Evil: Revelations and Revelations 2 were both focused on survival horror, by 2012's Resident Evil 6, the mainline series had more in common with *Die Hard* than it did *Night of the Living Dead*.

But Capcom was listening to fans. Behind the scenes, it was planning not only Resident Evil's next reinvention, but how to take it all back to its roots.

THE RESIDENT EVIL GAMES AT A GLANCE

After 25 years, there have been a lot of Resident Evil games. So, even in a piece as long as this one, we felt it was best to highlight only a few entries that have meant the most to the series rather than every game ever released. But for a look at the series as a whole, check out the list below for the major releases since Resident Evil's debut in 1996.

Resident Evil *(1996)*
Resident Evil 2 *(1998)*
Resident Evil 3: Nemesis *(1999)*
Resident Evil – Code: Veronica *(2000)*
Resident Evil Remake *(2002)*
Resident Evil 0 *(2002)*
Resident Evil: Dead Aim *(2003)*
Resident Evil Outbreak *(2003)*
Resident Evil 4 *(2005)*
Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles *(2007)*
Resident Evil 5 *(2009)*
Resident Evil: Revelations *(2012)*
Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City *(2012)*
Resident Evil 6 *(2012)*
Resident Evil: Revelations 2 *(2015)*
Umbrella Corps *(2016)*
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard *(2017)*
Resident Evil 2 Remake *(2019)*
Resident Evil 3 Remake *(2020)*
Resident Evil Village *(2021)*

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard, released in 2017, is simultaneously a return to Resident Evil's roots and the biggest reinvention of the series yet.

The first, most noticeable change is another shift in perspective. Barring the combat of Dead Aim, which shifted from third to first-person when aiming your gun, Biohazard is the first game in the series set in first person, telling the story of series newcomer Ethan Winters as he searches for his missing wife, Mia, who's been sending him cryptic video messages. While a lot of the Resident Evil staples are still in Biohazard, this switch in perspective makes the horror remarkably intimate compared to later Resident Evil games. Which is a big deal, as first and foremost the game is returning Resident Evil to pure survival horror.

However, the horror of Biohazard is wholly unique to the series. Whereas earlier games took inspiration from the movies of George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*) and science fiction, Biohazard leans heavily on slasher films. While the idea to scale the game back to only one location came from Sam Raimi's 1981 movie *The Evil Dead*, the most obvious inspiration for Biohazard is Tobe Hooper's 1974 film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where a group of friends encounter a family of cannibals – the most notable being Leatherface, a mute man who favors a chainsaw when murdering his victims. This inspiration is felt everywhere in Biohazard – including two chainsaw boss fights (which, to be fair, are also a big part of The Evil Dead series). Most apparent is the game's setting, which takes place in Louisiana rather than Texas, but still draws just as heavily on the American south for inspiration.

Like the homestead in *The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre, the Baker Estate in Biohazard is a southern home from Hell. Where ostensibly a family might have lived a normal life there at one point, now the houses are in disarray; both rely on themes of human and animal decay to reinforce the idea of a family gone wrong. While troublingly this does often rely on stereotypes about who lives in the south (crazy, dangerous), it also creates an oppressive and isolated atmosphere where help doesn't immediately come, and horror is found in the helplessness of the situation.

At times, the game borders on nihilism, impressing upon the player that nothing they do matters, that this danger will always be there. By the end of the game, you do escape, but judging by the trailers for Resident Evil Village, Biohazard's direct sequel, that sense of helplessness is reinforced by the fact Winters' peaceful life is upended by more tragedy.

While it doesn't commit in the same way to taboo subject matter, Biohazard is a rare example of a triple-A game borrowing from some pretty interesting corners of horror cinema. Its portrayal of southerners on the fringe is certainly reminiscent of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but also Wes Cravens' *The Hills Have Eyes*, about a family that encounters a group of cannibals in the Nevada desert. The way it interjects found footage to flesh out its backstory has some very direct homages to *The Blair Witch Project*, while also giving off the same "am I allowed to be seeing this" vibes of other pseudo-found-footage documentaries like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* – of which the final two, like Biohazard, also rely on bleak, unflinching violence and torture. There's also a healthy dose of the Saw series in there, for good measure. It's honestly difficult to think of many other triple-A games that share DNA with any of these examples, and while it's hard to say Biohazard was inspired by every single aforementioned movie, the fact it inhabits a similar media space as any of them is a unique place for any video game to be in.

All of this is to say, Biohazard is a swing for the fences. It's Resident Evil returning to its roots in terms of some mechanics and the simple fact it's scary, but it's also completely reimagining what a Resident Evil game can be going forward. While it likely won't be the last time the series is reinvented or reimagined, it serves as a line in the sand in terms of how Capcom sees the Resident Evil franchise – something open to experimentation, while still retaining the core of what made the original games work. While we don't know whether or not Resident Evil Village will lean toward some of the same extremes Biohazard did, but judging by our limited looks pre-release, it already shows the series going in more new directions, this time lycanthropy, vampirism, and occult horror, while also remaining in first-person.

Resident Evil is no longer just the story of Umbrella, the T-Virus, and zombies. Biohazard shows that Resident Evil can be anything, and given that the game is Capcom's second best-selling game of all time, it's safe to assume the new direction worked. Unlike earlier Resident Evil games, which we can view with hindsight, it may take us a while to fully grasp the impact Biohazard had on the series. Regardless, it'll be fascinating to watch how Resident Evil evolves moving forward.

RPD

RESIDENT EVIL 2 REMAKE AND BEYOND

While Biohazard is a look at the future of Resident Evil, it's only part of the overall story.

In 2019, Capcom released Resident Evil 2 … again. However, similar to 2002's Resident Evil remake, which updated the 1996 original for modern sensibilities, the new Resident Evil 2 was a complete overhaul of the 1998 game, made with Capcom's modern RE Engine (first designed for Biohazard, but also used on Devil May Cry 5, Monster Hunter Rise, and more), complete with up-to-date visuals and gameplay.

Whereas Biohazard went first-person, RE2 Remake remains third-person, trading in the original's fixed camera angles for the behind-the-shoulder look of Resident Evil 4 and later games. Barring that and a few other changes, it's a relatively faithful remake for modern times. And it's scary, too.

Navigating a young Leon Kennedy and Claire Redfield through the Racoon City police station, there's a sense of dread permeating the RE2 Remake. Zombies now are persistent, meaning if you don't kill one, they'll be there the next time you walk through whatever wing of the station you didn't finish the job in. The game loses some steam when it leaves the police station, but it's first half is easily some of the best survival horror in the series. Zombies – by this point a cliche for Resident Evil and media in general – take on a new sense of danger in RE2 Remake; you have to be smart when navigating the game and taking on threats.

This is all without mentioning the biggest threat in RE2 Remake: Mr. X, an impossibly large tyrant that constantly and persistently stalks you during your playthrough. While Mr. X was in the original Resident Evil 2, technical limitations meant he was constrained to more scripted events. In RE2 Remake, he's a dynamic threat, constantly walking around the police station at the same time you are; you can even hear his footsteps on other floors of the building as you walk around. This enemy is most effective in throwing off your expertise of the game. The police department is not so big that it's unmanageable; eventually you will expertly know your way around and can get to and from pretty easily. That is unless Mr. X shows up. He can't be killed, only stunned, and does a massive amount of damage. He's a constant thorn in your side and a great way to amplify your anxiety while playing the game, as there's no way to really stop him. Eventually he will show up, throwing a wrench in your plans, making you have to quickly adapt.

RE2 Remake proves that the groundwork established by the oldest games in the series is still effective – with a modern coat of polish. As of this writing, RE2 Remake is Capcom's third best-selling game of all time, behind only Monster Hunter: World and Biohazard, numbers one and two, respectively.

Considering Biohazard and RE2 Remake together, it paints an interesting picture for the future of the series – one that looks at the past and future equally, while reimagining and reinventing all the same. This is most evident when looking at the Resident Evil 3: Nemesis remake that came out in 2020, which played identically to RE2 Remake, and Resident Evil Village, which retains Biohazard's characters and camera perspective. Armchair speculation indicates remakes of older games will get the same treatment as RE2 Remake, while mainline games will go the way of Biohazard, but we don't know for sure. At the very least, it's difficult to imagine Capcom not using the third-person perspective it pioneered in at least the heavily rumored Resident Evil 4 remake. Where Resident Evil 9 and beyond go is anyone's guess right now and we're years from finding out.

Regardless, Resident Evil's time as a punchline, most common during the Resident Evil 5 and 6 eras, is in the rearview mirror – at least for now. While the Resident Evil 3 remake wasn't as well-received as the RE2 Remake, it's still one of Capcom's best-selling games of all time. Resident Evil Village is one of 2021's most-anticipated games and the rumored RE4 remake is also hotly anticipated, though obviously still unconfirmed.

Through ups and downs, 25 years later, the Resident Evil series is still a juggernaut. While it's hard to say new releases have the influence older games did, they're still a big deal. And as we look toward to the future of Resident Evil, considering the way Capcom is constantly changing the formula, trying new, weird, and unproven things, we're excited to see where we'll be scared next. ◆

BACK BEHIND THE LENS

We get one final look at New Pokémon Snap before its release

» PLATFORM Switch **» STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **» PUBLISHER** Nintendo
» DEVELOPER Bandai Namco Studios **» RELEASE** April 30

With Pokémon Red & Blue and the anime less than a year old in the U.S., 1999's Pokémon Snap on Nintendo 64 let players step into a completely new role in the Pokémon world. Rather than traveling across the land, searching far and wide for Pokémon to catch, train, and battle, players instead moved behind the camera lens in an experience that brought the world of Pokémon to life in ways that were, to that point, unprecedented. Now, more than two decades later, Pokémon Snap is finally getting a follow up on Switch. Separated by 22 years and three full console generations, New Pokémon Snap looks to retain the spirit of the original while adding new folds to the formula. I had a chance to watch extended demos and speak to the director, Haruki Suzaki, to see how this new game evolves the 1999 cult classic.

by Brian Shea

CAPTURING POKÉMON'S GOOD SIDE

By 2021, we've experienced the Pokémon universe from so many angles that I wondered if the Pokémon Snap formula would still feel novel. However, following my time with the game, I'm once again excited to pick up the camera. Just like in the original, you assume the role of an enthusiastic photographer who travels on predetermined paths through various environments snapping photographs of Pokémon in their natural habitats.

Keeping that basic formula was important to the development team at Bandai Namco Studios. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the team instead looked for ways to modernize, adjust, and enhance. "I absolutely wanted to keep the foundation of the base gameplay where everyone can have fun just looking at Pokémon thriving in nature and taking snapshots of them," Suzaki says.

Suzaki has worked at Bandai Namco since 2002 and served as director of the company's Pokémon fighting game, Pokkén Tournament. That game debuted in arcades and Wii U, but has since made its way to Switch. Because of this, Suzaki has a keen appreciation of not only the Pokémon franchise, but also how the Switch can enhance preexisting games or franchises. With New Pokémon Snap, Suzaki wants to deliver on the potential of the Switch hardware, giving players lush, beautiful environments to move through as they take photos of their favorite creatures.

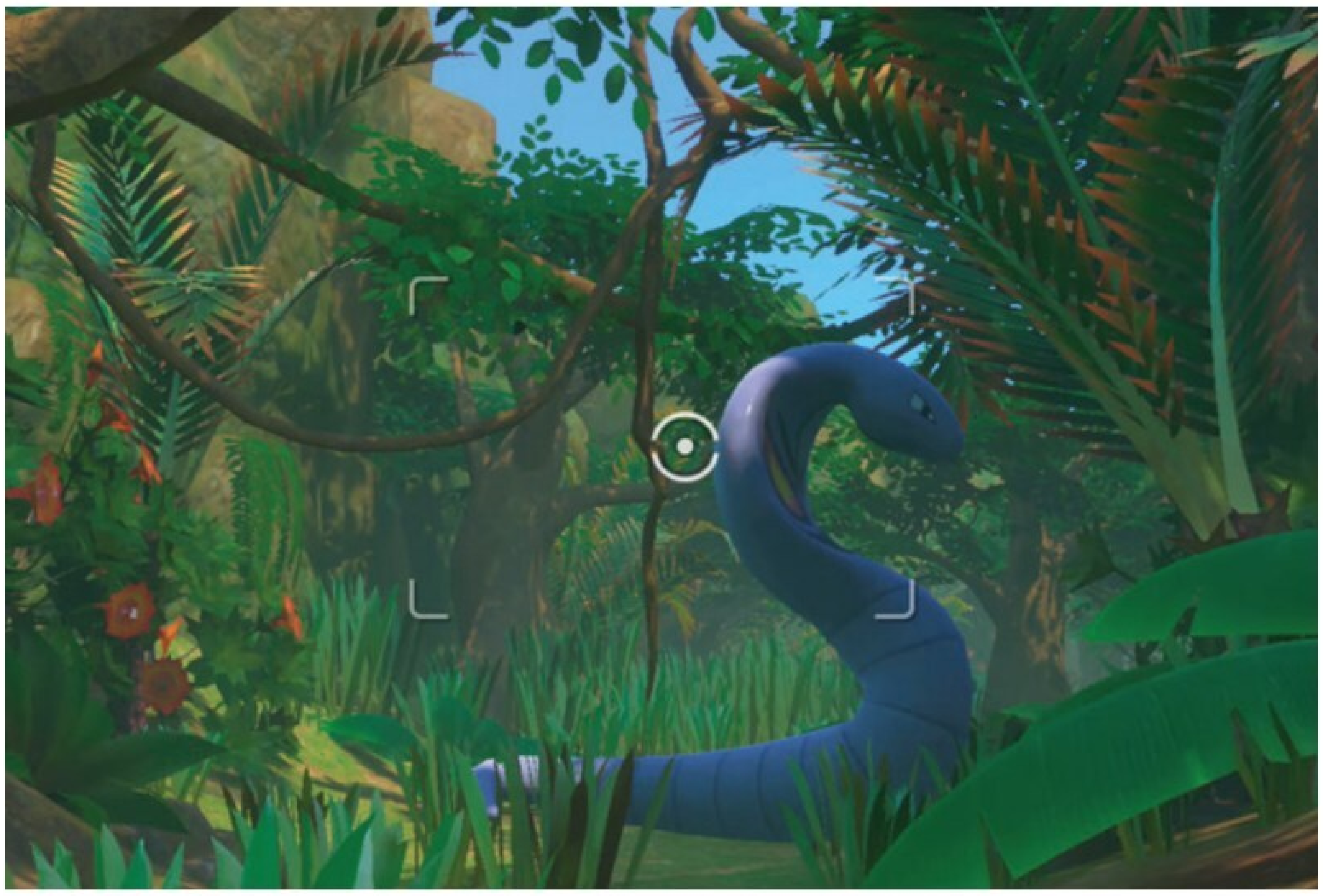
Of course, a lot has changed for the Pokémon franchise since 1999; not only have trainers expanded their horizons far beyond Kanto, but the Pokédex has exploded from the original 151 entries to the nearly 900 that exist today. While Sword & Shield did not include every Pokémon, which remains a controversial topic, that subject is more palatable when it comes to spin-off games like Snap.

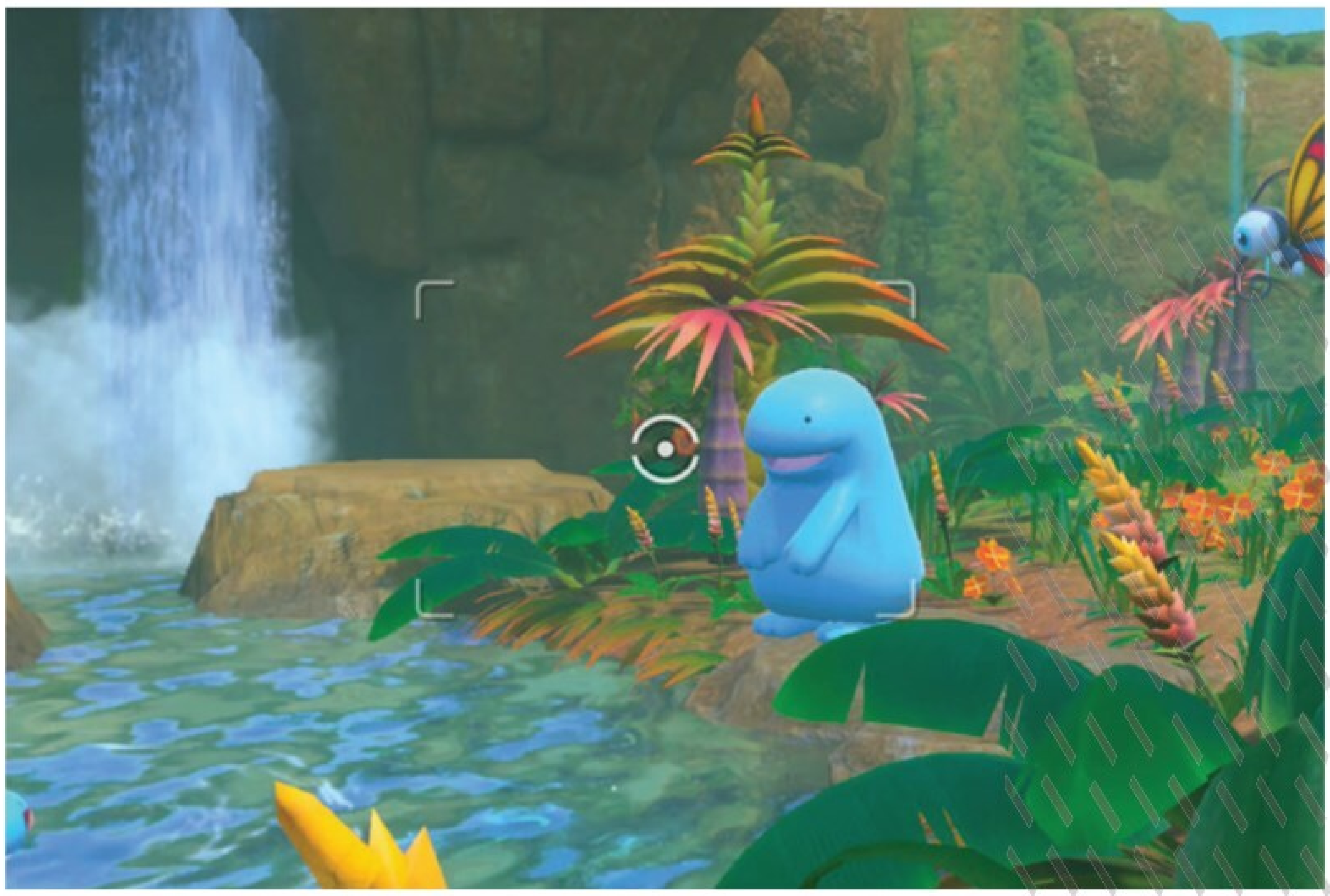
According to Suzaki, the theme of photographing Pokémon in their natural habitats served as the team's guide. "The selection of Pokémon was truly hard," he says. "My vision was to create a world where you can actually imagine wild Pokémon thriving in their natural habitats and ecosystem. At first, we thought about Pokémon's natural habitats and fascinating landscapes and climates to research. Then, we narrowed down our choices by balancing out how different Pokémon would live in these habitats and their relationships within each environment. As a result, there are more than 200 Pokémon, rich in variety, appearing in this game."

A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

In an exclusive look at the Founja Jungle stage in New Pokémon Snap, I see firsthand what Suzaki means when he talks about creating beautiful habitats full of Pokémon that make sense for the locale; you can almost feel the humidity of the jungle stage from the jump. While you must work to get the attention of certain Pokémon, the opportunities to see your favorite creatures throughout the game's Lental region are plentiful.

By tossing fluffruit at Pokémon in the environment, you can lure them to better positions for your snapshots and make them happier in the process





Whether you're talking a group of Bounsweet relaxing on an overhead branch, a Pikipek hammering away at a tree, or an Arbok behind the brush, you have several different creatures to focus on and try to interact with using fluffruit or other means. Tossing a fluffruit, which resembles an apple, in the direction of Pokémon can elicit different reactions from creatures. While the most common reaction is happily chasing it down to munch on, the reactions vary by Pokémon. For example, one Liepard, in true cat fashion, completely ignores the fluffruit in favor of continuing its nap.

In addition to fluffruit, players have other tools at their disposal. Scan allows you to not only see if something is hiding beyond your view, but also garner a reaction from some Pokémon. You can use the Melody tool to see if the Pokémon feel like dancing. New Pokémon Snap also introduces Illumina orbs, which can trigger unique behavior and cause Pokémon to glow.

The key to getting the best shots is to keep your eyes peeled and get creative with how you use the tools. "These are simple things, but a combination of these tools, timing, and situations can cause a variety of things to happen," Suzaki says.

Not all Pokémon need to be incentivized, however. Throughout Founja Jungle, Beautifly curiously flutter right up to you, giving you several chances to snap them both alone and in swarms. Later in the stage, you're given a scenic waterfall with a pool surrounded by species including Magikarp, Quagsire, and more. I wonder if there's some way to push that Magikarp into the waterfall, but I unfortunately don't get the opportunity as my look at this stage ends.

SEASIDE SNAPSHOT

In addition to Founja Jungle, I'm treated to multiple playthroughs of an early tropical level called Blushing Beach. As players travel to different islands in the Lental region, they explore vastly different biomes, even diving beneath the ocean's surface in some cases. Sadly, I don't get to see the secrets hiding under the waves in Blushing Beach, but I do get a great sense for what to expect from this sandy stage depending on when you visit.

The first playthrough of Blushing Beach I see takes place during the day. Right off the bat, I spot a couple of Exeggutor frolicking across the sand as a Crabrawler scurries along. A Lapras swims in the shallows and a Pikachu playfully runs past. In the distance, I spot Vivillon and Wingull soaring over the sea. Immediately I recall the fond memories I have of the Nintendo 64 original. That scene, with Exeggutor basking in the sun while other Pokémon go about their days, takes me back to the first stage of the original Pokémon Snap, where a flock of Pidgey fly toward the camera before you see Pikachu, Doduo, and Butterfree hanging out on the beach.

We toss the Exeggutor a fluffruit and it joyfully scoops it up

While in the Lental region, you're tasked with filling in your Photodex while also researching the mysterious Illumina phenomenon, which causes Pokémon to glow

as we snap away. We continue along the beach, but another Exeggutor sits in the way, bringing our NEO-ONE pod to a halt. We could lure the big guy away to clear the path, but instead we look to our left and notice something is bustling in the bushes. We scan to reveal that some Bellossom are tucked away. As Suzaki says, it's up to the player to figure out how to lure Pokémon to you and get them to react. In this case, we use the Melody tool to bring two dancing Bellossom out of the bushes. As players of the original game know, if you can snap multiple Pokémon in the act of doing something unique or exciting, you're well on your way to getting a highly scored photo.

Now that we've gotten some great shots of Bellossom, it's time to move on. We throw a fluffruit and pull the Exeggutor off the path so we can continue. While you can't manually stop your vehicle whenever you want, certain encounters like this one give you a little extra time to figure out how to optimize your opportunities.

Continuing down the path, the pod leaves solid ground to float among the waves. Weaving between rocks that jut out of the sea, we have a wealth of opportunities presented to us. Do we photograph the Machamp hanging out on shore or do we focus on the Pyukumuku lounging on the rock next to Corsola? We end up scanning two water-types on the rock, causing Pyukumuku to wave at us and Corsola to flash a smile our way.

Finneon swim beneath us as we head back to shore. This trip through Blushing Beach is just about over, but not before we spot a Stunfisk lying flat on the sand. We shoot a picture of it and then head straight for the goal, exiting the daytime run of Blushing Beach.

HOLDING A MIRROR TO YOUR WORK

After completing each stage, you select the photos you want to share with Professor Mirror. Each shot is given a rating up to four stars. This is important, as your Photodex can hold one photo of each Pokémon at each rating. Once you present your favorite shots to the professor, he'll score them based on pose, size, direction, placement, other Pokémon in the shot, and what the background looks like. You then have the option to replace the current picture in the Photodex with the new one.

If you feel you could make your shots a bit better with some tweaking, New Pokémon Snap gives you the tools to perfect them. Seemingly inspired by the Instagram age, New Pokémon Snap allows you to "re-snap" your photos by adjusting the zoom and tweaking the brightness, blur, focal size, and focal point. You can add a filter and even stickers to create comical or cute scenes within your shots. Unfortunately, Professor Mirror will only grade your raw photos, and thus, you can only save the originals to your Photodex. Don't worry, though, as you can still save the re-snapped photos to your in-game album and share them with the world online.

Based on the photos you provide to the professor, you gain expedition points, which boost your research level for the stage. Once you reach a certain threshold, you unlock new levels for that area and time of day.

"Pokémon behavior will change as the research level increases," Suzaki says. "A new research will start when your level increases to search for the changed behavior and photograph it. The game is also about trying to take a photo of a great moment you missed in the next trip, so if the research level is the same, the research course stays the same in general. But if the research level goes up, you will see many changes such as Pokémon that didn't appear before will start appearing, Pokémon that didn't eat fluffruit because they were being cautious will now eat them, and the pod's course will also change."

NOCTURNAL NEGATIVES

After chatting with Professor Mirror and further filling out the Photodex, we jump back into Blushing Beach. However, this time, we're going after the sun sets. As you might expect, the Pokémon you spot at night are often different from the ones you see during the day. Even as the character is entering the environment, I spot a Drifblim in the background and a towering Zangoose walks along the path. We throw the Zangoose a fluffruit and get a great shot of of it smiling as it enjoys it.

As we approach the bush where the Bellossom were during the day, we once again scan the area. The tool tells us something sounds like it's sharpening a blade. This time, we're not graced by the playful twirling of the smiling grass-types; instead, a fierce Seviper emerges just in time for a photo. It's a good thing we scanned early on, as there's no Exeggutor to block the path at night.

The night path is the same as the one we traversed in the sunlight, but your opportunities are vastly different. As soon as we go out onto the water, Inkay floats by and we see a Magikarp asleep on the rock where the Pyukumuku was during the day. We could snap a photo of the sleeping Magikarp, but what's the fun in that? Scanning does little to wake up the sleeping splasher, but by tossing an Illumina orb at it, the Magikarp springs to life, and flips off the rock and into the water. We capture its acrobatics before moving to the next rock.

This evening expedition presents an Octillery perching on the rock next to a Crystabloom plant. We throw an Illumina orb at the Crystabloom and the octopod reacts by spitting a fountain of ink straight into the sky. We snap a photo, then throw a fluffruit at it and the Pokémon waves at us with one of its arms. As we continue to survey our surroundings, I spot a Bellossom and a Zangoose relaxing on the shore, but just above them, a Mareanie looks down off the cliffside, presenting a new Pokémon for us to photograph; we don't waste the opportunity.

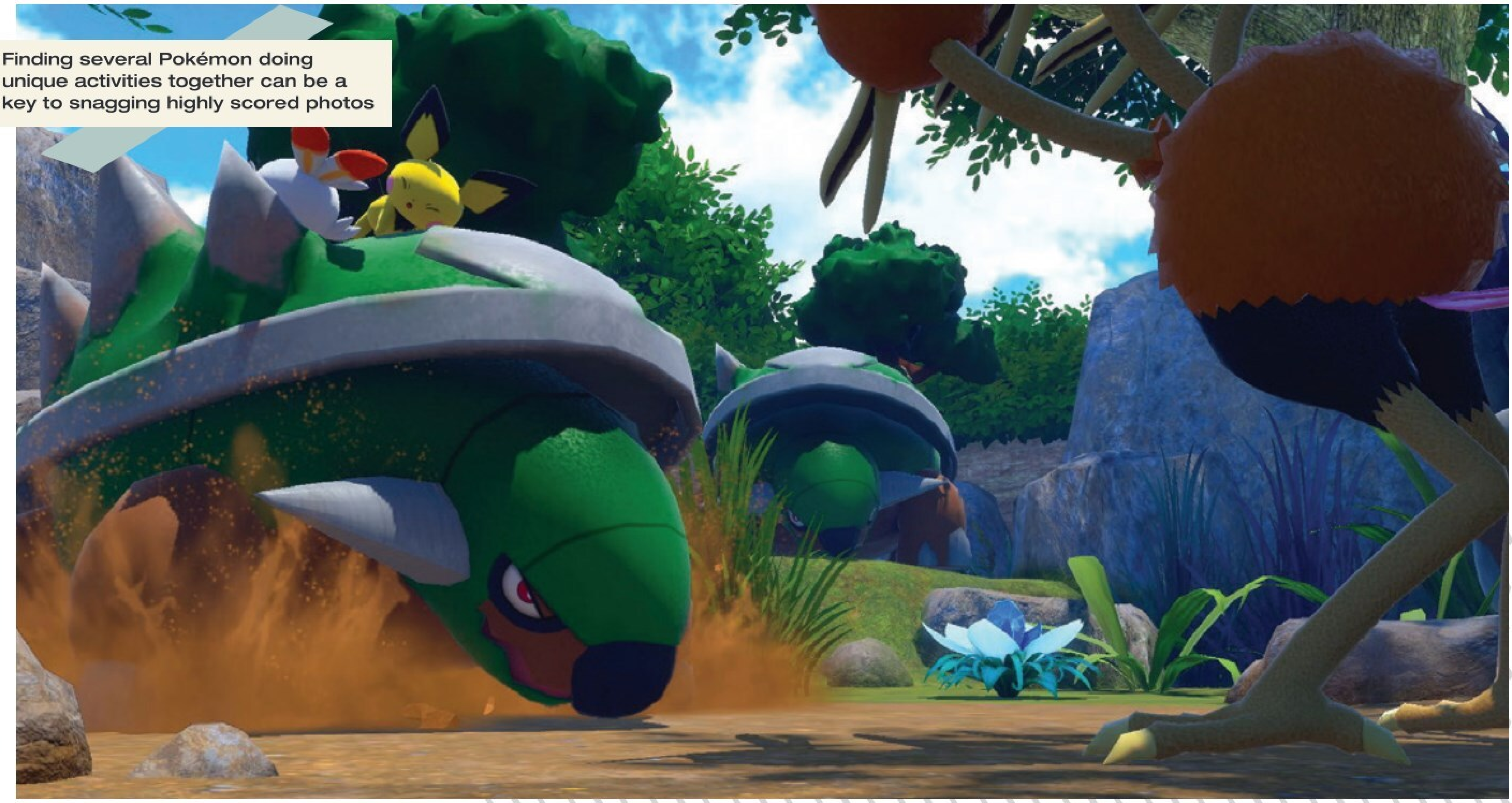
While we're out at sea, an icon pops up in between some of the protruding rocks. If you scan that, you're able to go along a different path through the stage. However, to fully explore how different night and day versions of stages really are, we opt to stay on the main path.

We return to land to perhaps the most exciting opportunity of my entire demo: Several Sandygast lay hidden beneath the beach, while an Alolan Raichu sleeps on shore next to a chill Octillery. We toss a fluffruit at the Sandygast to get it to emerge. As we pass by, the Raichu awakens, hops on its surfboard-shaped tail, and rides out into the waves. Just before we reach the goal, we lob a fluffruit at a Sandygast next to the Octillery. When the creepy sandcastle Pokémon emerges, it gives Octillery a huge fright and the water-type Pokémon panics, fleeing out into the middle of the ocean, arms a-flailing.

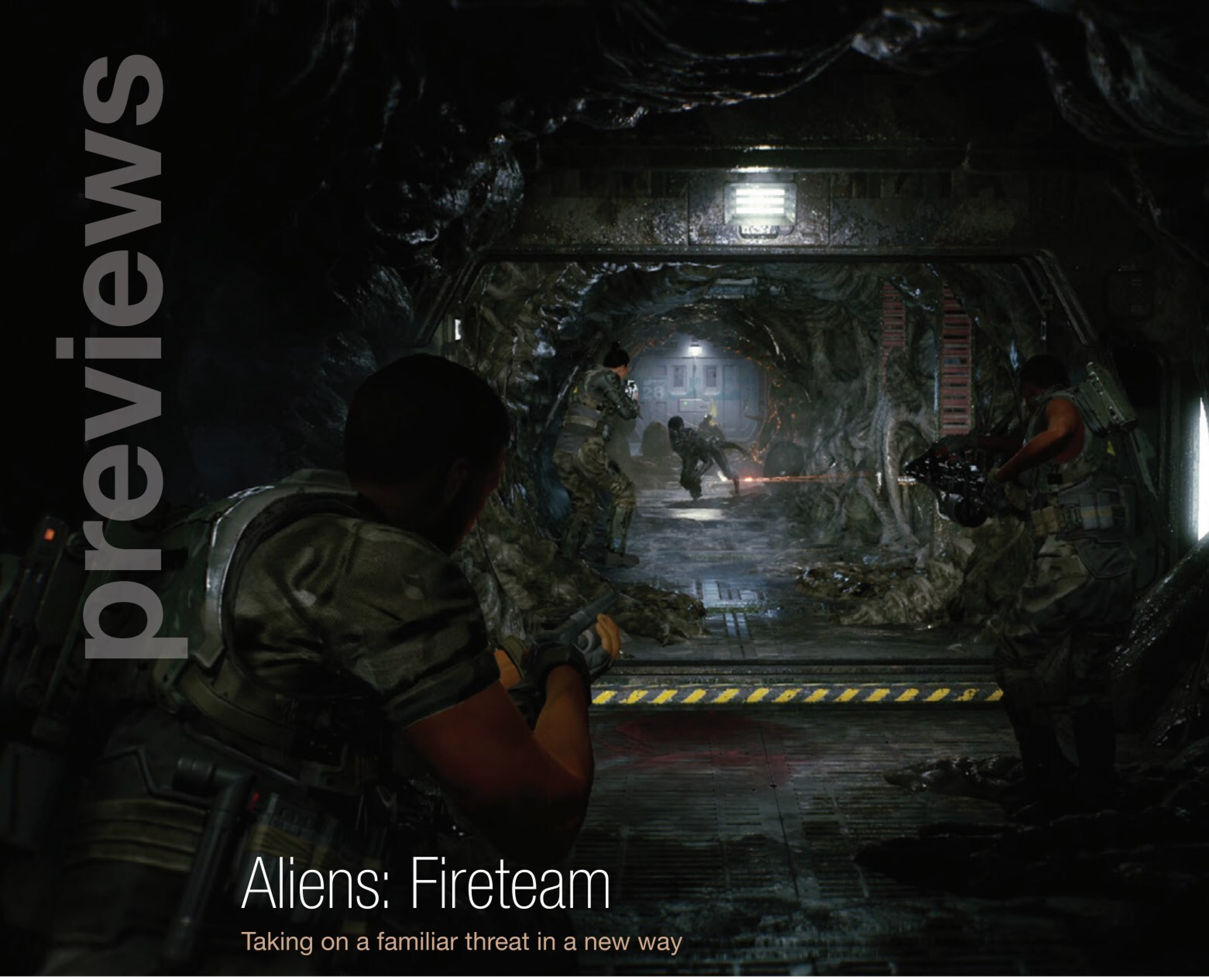
This hilarious scene is just an example of how players can not only evoke interesting reactions, but exciting interactions between multiple Pokémon in the habitat. The environmental puzzles of New Pokémon Snap appear to be just as much fun as they were in the original. Shortly after that, my night-time run ends, as does my time with New Pokémon Snap.

DEVELOPING RESULTS

If what I saw is any indication, New Pokémon Snap effectively captures the magic of the original. With a new region, new mechanics, and a vastly expanded collection of Pokémon to pull from, I'm excited to see how this entry improves upon the first game. More importantly, I can't wait to get back behind the lens and document the fascinating sights for all to see when the game is released at the end of this month. ◆



Finding several Pokémon doing unique activities together can be a key to snagging highly scored photos



Aliens: Fireteam

Taking on a familiar threat in a new way

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(3-Player Online)

» Publisher
Cold Iron Studios

» Developer
Cold Iron Studios

» Release
Summer

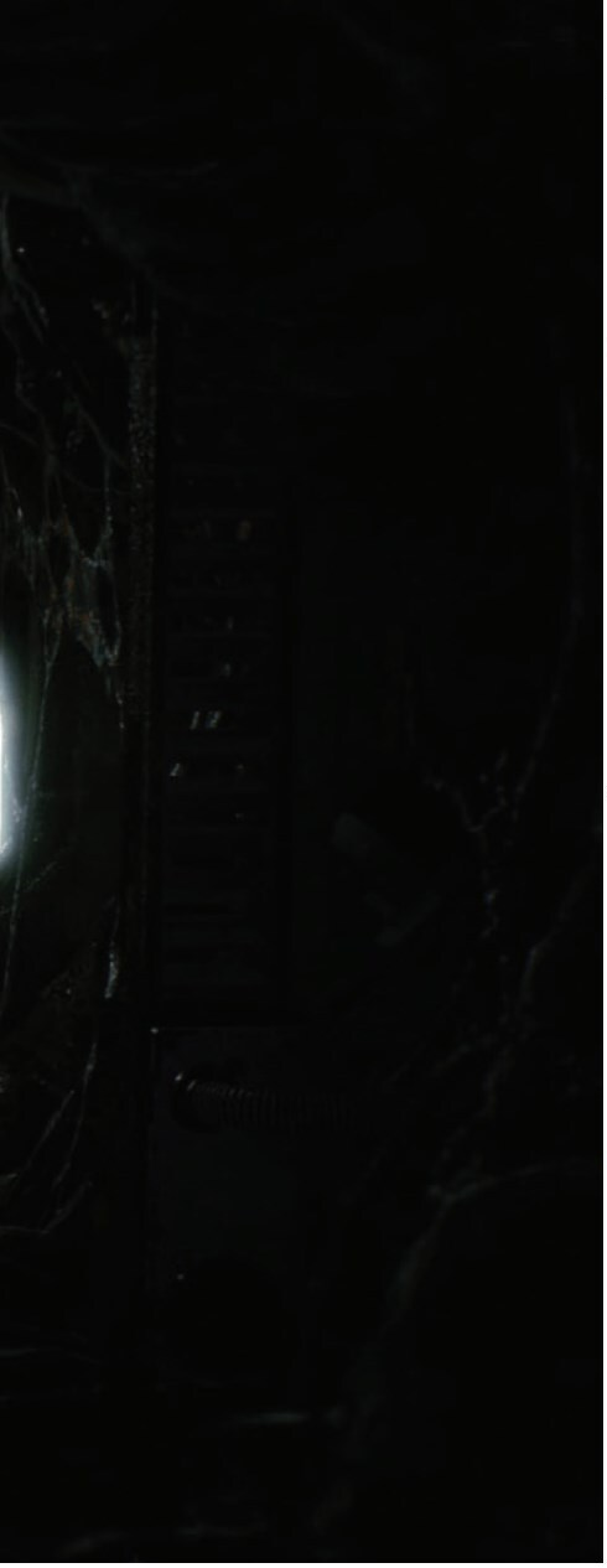
The Alien universe has had its share of ups and downs – and that's just looking at the films. Games based on the menacing monster Ridley Scott introduced in 1979's *Alien* have met a similarly inconsistent fate. That first movie was a direct inspiration for the excellent Alien: Isolation, but countless other creators have looked to James Cameron's 1986 sequel as a lodestar. The setup – spacefaring Marines facing off against an insurmountable xenomorphic threat – is seemingly as close to a slam-dunk as it gets. And yet, we've seen a few prominently missed shots over the years. Aliens: Fireteam is the latest game to make contact with the IP, and an early look at the team-based shooter in action shows an encouraging amount of potential.

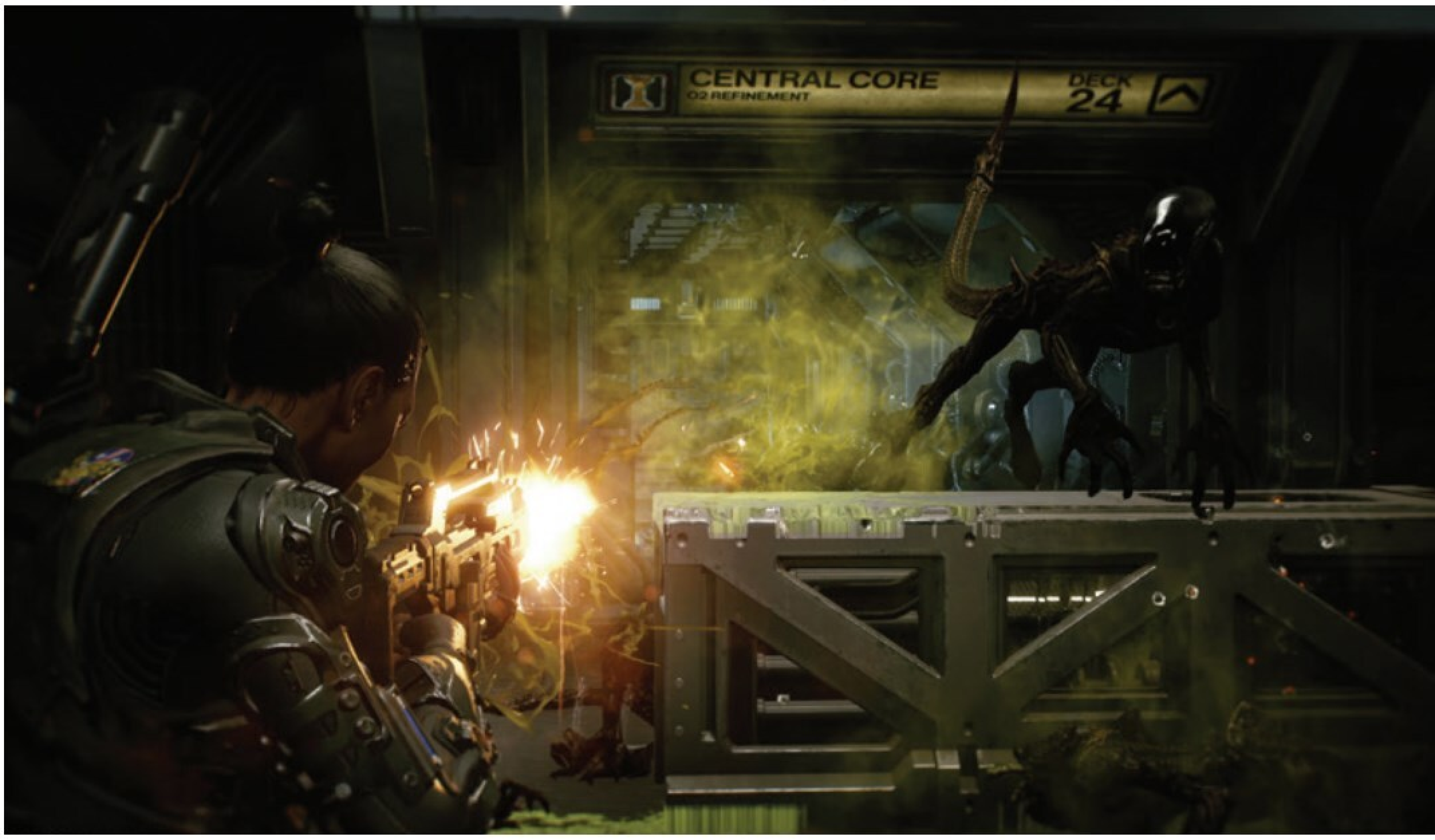
Aliens: Fireteam is set in the year 2202, which is close to the era fans are familiar with, but with a buffer of several decades after the events of the Alien film trilogy. At this point in the lore's history, xenomorphs are a known quantity. They're no less feared, but they're also no longer the rumored menace (or closely guarded corporate secrets) they once were. You're a newly minted member of a United States Colonial Marine fireteam, joined by two of your fellow Marines on a variety of bug-hunting missions. The fantasy is certainly familiar, with the haunting pings of tracking radars and staccato blasts from Smartguns, but don't expect to play through a greatest-hits recreation of the movies. The team at Cold Iron Studios was determined to tell its own story with Fireteam, even as it drew from elements that have become part of our collective culture.

"We've been fans for forever, right?" says head of studio Craig Zinkievich. "I hope it's obvious. It's just super near and dear to all of our hearts here." Part of the studio's job in creating Fireteam was to temper its fandom to ensure it wasn't taking on too much. "I think probably one of the harder things was to make sure that we boiled down what we wanted to do and made sure that we were focused in on it. We're not trying to do everything within the Aliens universe that we want to do, because we'd never be done."

I get to see a little bit of what the team has decided to focus in on in a live demo. The Colonial Marines stationed on the USS Endeavor have mobilized to the planet LV895 after hearing a distress call. An orbital refinery, the Katanga, hasn't been heard from for two decades. And now, there are troubling signs of life.

Aliens: Fireteam drops three user-created USCM soldiers into the gnashing teeth of a xenomorphic threat. It hardly seems like a fair fight, but each of the five different in-game classes has its own unique set of weapons and support items to help even the odds a little. The technician can deploy automated turrets and chuck stun grenades that will temporarily disorient marauding enemies. The doc, on the





other hand, can be relied on to keep the team healthy, even providing temporary performance enhancing buffs. Demolishers head straight into battle (hopefully, with a doc nearby), with the gunner and recon roles filling out the possible options. If you aren't able to bring two friends along, bots will round out your fireteam – there's no room for solo Ellen Ripley types here.

The Katanga is a stark facility that's clearly purpose-built rather than constructed for aesthetics. Scanning the catwalks and rock faces, there isn't a whole lot to admire – which is good, because we're almost instantly set upon by a rush of drones. They skitter toward us, limbs flailing and shrieking as our weapons cut them down. Keeping a healthy distance is key, as their corrosive blood will create a problem for anyone within splashing range. That damage is increased depending on the difficulty you're playing. Similarly, smaller quality-of-life enhancements like enemy outlines getting subtly highlighted are reduced when you increase the challenge level. To further add to the difficulty, players can equip modifier cards before heading out, which can do smaller things like reducing the color spectrum or more material changes such as making it so only headshots do damage to enemies.

Once the fireteam works its way into an interior area, there's a lull in the action for everyone to regroup. Ammo is replenished, turrets are deployed, and the group prepares itself. One member of the fireteam summons an elevator, and a countdown starts. The objective is simple: survive until the car – and the possibility of an extraction – arrives. That's easier said than done, as more xenos scamper into sight along the walls and from darkened corridors. Cold Iron says Fireteam is home to 11 different xenomorph variations, from the lowly facehuggers to the top-tier Praetorians.

We barely limp our way to safety after getting rushed by some of the larger xenos, but we somehow make it out. Survival means that you'll be able to upgrade your weapons and kit at the Endeavor, and also tweak the way you look with more than 80 different weapon customizations alone. Don't expect lootboxes or microtransactions, however. Zinkievich is adamant that you get a complete game with Aliens: Fireteam, without getting nickeled and dimed afterward.

After talking with Zinkievich, it's clear that his team is focused on delivering a pure Aliens experience, without using fanservice as a crutch. You're not going to see familiar faces or cameos, and you won't be revisiting places that you've already seen in movies and games before. There aren't even any Predator references (believe me, I asked). That's all reassuring news for players who want to get back to the core of what makes the Aliens fantasy so compelling 35 years after it hit theaters. » **Jeff Cork**

Pokémon Legends: Arceus

A brave new step into a familiar old world

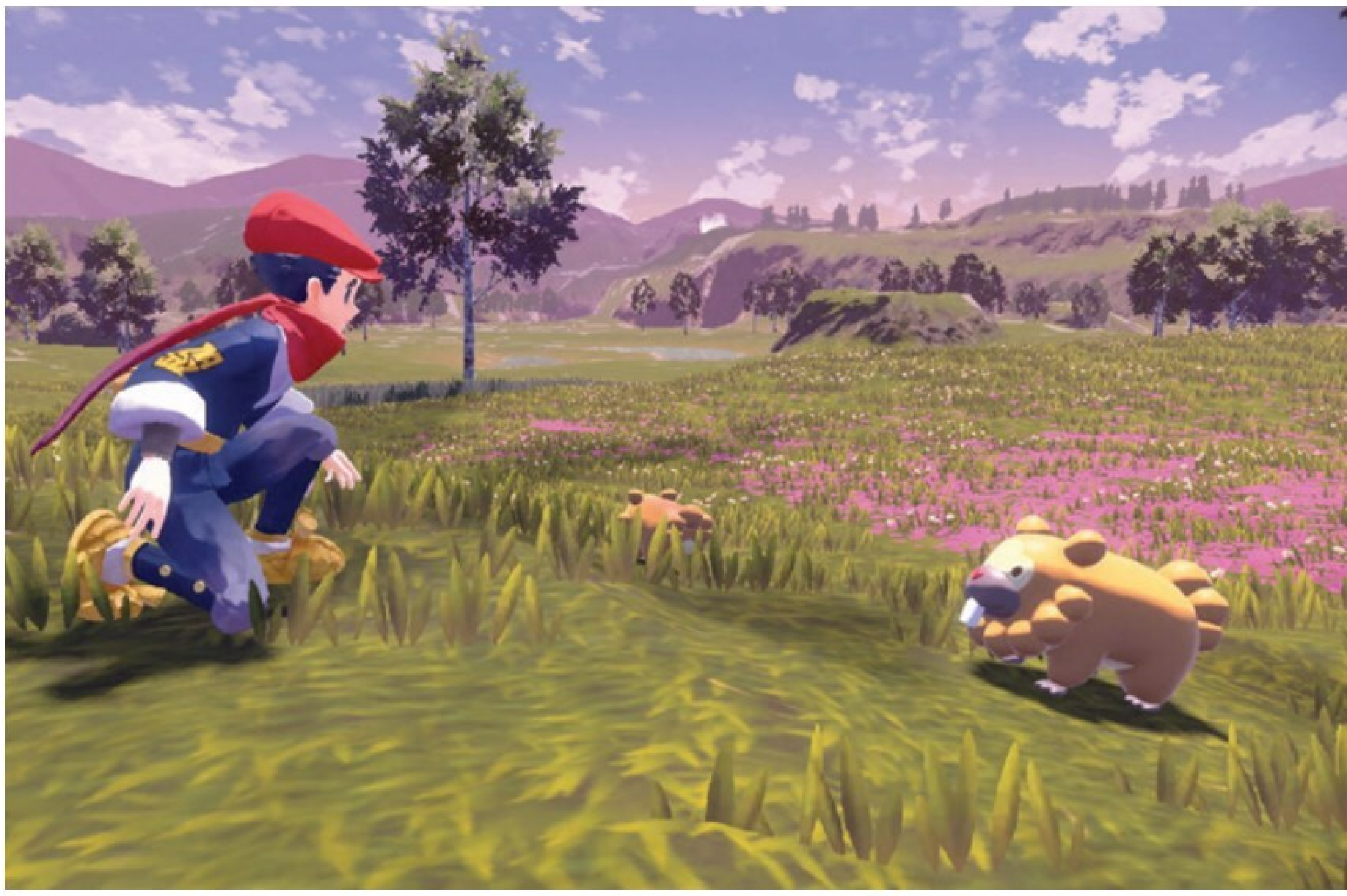
» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Game Freak

» **Release**
Early 2022



For much of its existence, the Pokémon franchise has followed a consistent formula. Pokémon Legends: Arceus relies on some conventions most closely associated with the series but focuses certain elements to create what looks to be a wholly unique game for longtime fans.

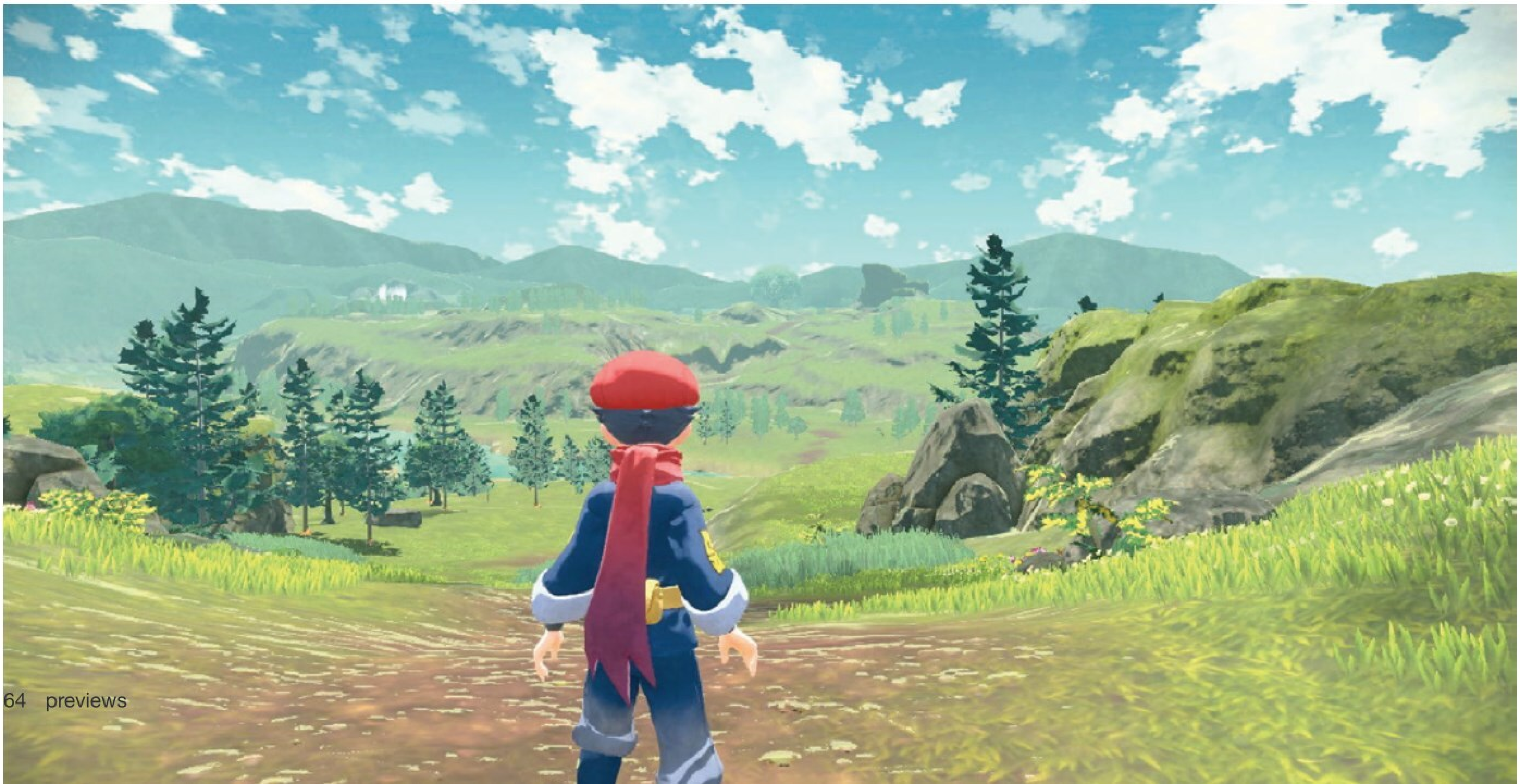
Pokémon Legends: Arceus transports you to the past as you help build the first Pokédex in the Sinnoh region. This new Pokémon spin-off combines action and RPG in ways the franchise has never done before. Players choose from a male or female protagonist, then select a partner Pokémon from Rowlet, Cyndaquil, and Oshawott, three Pokémon native to other regions of the Pokémon world. Once you have your selection, you embark on a journey to explore the then-undeveloped Sinnoh region, documenting all the creatures you stumble upon along the way.

The Sinnoh region is full of diverse biomes, complete with vast, open expanses that teem with wild Pokémon to observe. This version of Sinnoh is further in the past than the version players explored in Pokémon Diamond and Pearl. With Mount Coronet towering over the fledgling region's rich natural setting, this is a unique version of the familiar corner of Pokémon's world. Pokémon Legends: Arceus is set so far in the past that Poké Balls are made mostly from wood, and steam puffs out of the top of the ball when a Pokémon is caught.

Once in a Pokémon's habitat, players can study their behavior in the wild, then sneak up on them and throw a Poké Ball their way. If stealth isn't your thing and you prefer the traditional direct approach, you can also battle wild creatures using your ally Pokémon. Unlike past games, you don't need to worry about transitioning into battle screens. Instead, you simply throw a Poké Ball that houses your ally in the direction of a wild monster to move seamlessly into battle.

As the name implies, the key to the mysterious story surrounds Arceus. This Legendary Pokémon is said to be the creator of the Sinnoh region and the Pokémon universe at large. It's unknown if this is the only major mystery to unravel over the course of the story, but to this point, there has been no mention of gym leaders, any kind of Pokémon League, a snarky rival to compete with, or an evil team to thwart over the course of your adventures. Of course, that's all subject to change, or could get announced before the game launches early next year.

The entirety of what we've seen seems to combine the openness of the Wild Areas from Pokémon Sword & Shield with the explorative nature of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. This unique vibe reignites our imagination for what the Pokémon franchise can be, just like we felt when we first heard the mainline series was coming to consoles for the first time. If the short glimpse we've gotten holds true in the final product, the future of the long-running series is as intriguing as it's ever been. » **Brian Shea**



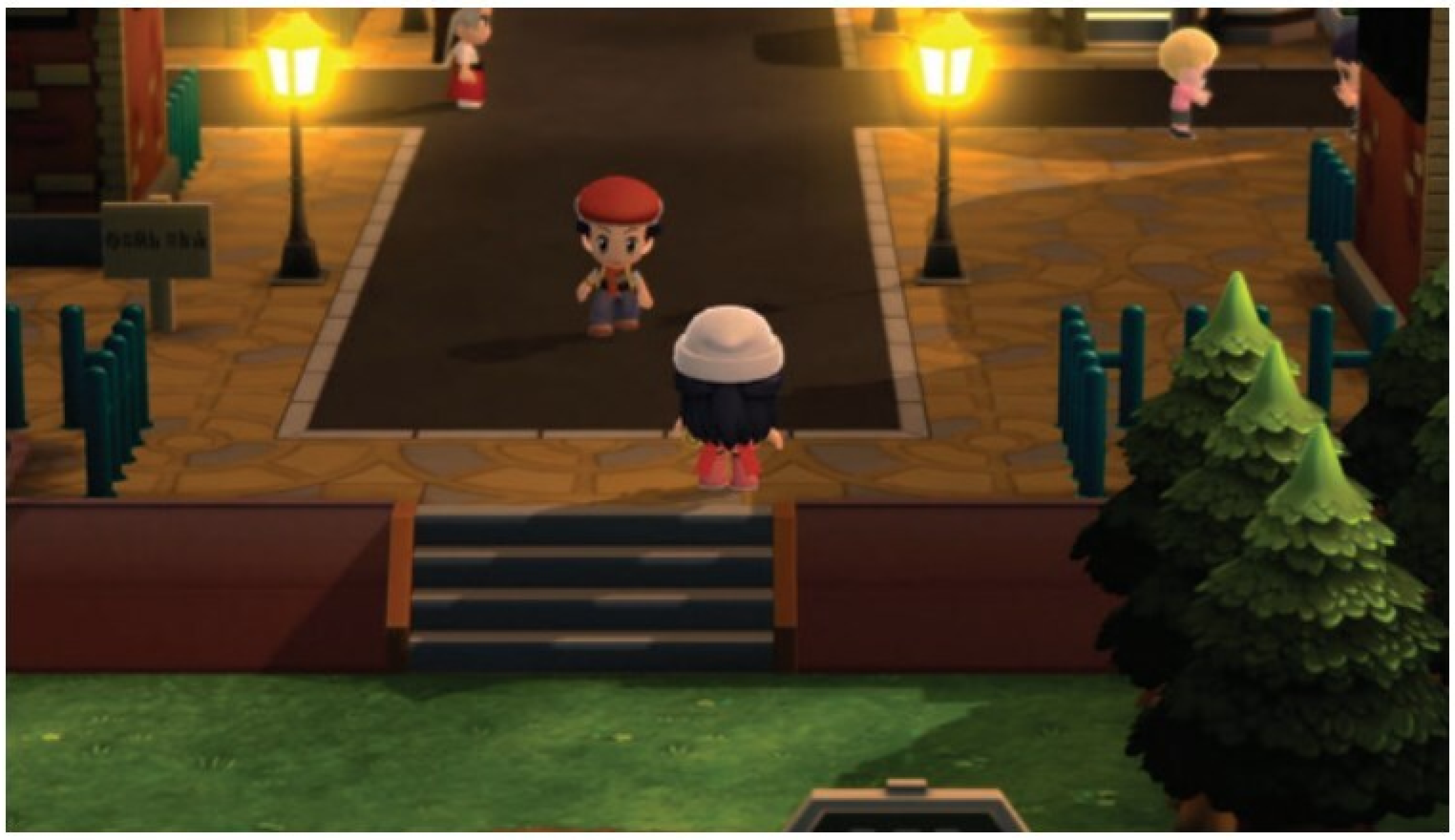
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl

Another blast from the past out of Sinnoh

As we already covered on page 64, Pokémon Legends: Arceus tells a unique story in a Sinnoh region that existed long before the one in 2006's Pokémon Diamond & Pearl. But what about players who missed out on those older installments or want to revisit them without dusting off their DS? For those fans, The Pokémon Company is remaking the original DS games for Switch as Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl.

These remakes bring the Sinnoh region to life in new ways thanks to the vastly more powerful technology of the Nintendo Switch. Development studio ILCA is taking lead on the project, but series producer, composer, and original director of Diamond & Pearl Junichi Masuda from Game Freak is also assisting with development.

While we don't know a lot about these enhanced remakes, ILCA and Masuda have plans to make them more approachable through easy-to-understand, player-friendly conveniences. You can also expect a fresh coat of paint that adds modern graphics, complete with a chibi-style design in the overworld and more detailed character models during the up-close battle sequences.



If you have fond memories of your Sinnoh adventures and are concerned about the core experience changing too much, The Pokémon Company assures players that ILCA is taking extra care to preserve the feeling of the original games. The studio is working to accurately translate the towns' sense of scale, and the routes twist and wind in the same ways they did in 2006. With Let's Go Pikachu & Eevee and Sword & Shield, plus the upcoming New Pokémon Snap and Pokémon Legends: Arceus, the Switch is fast becoming the ultimate machine for Pokémon fans. We can't wait to take a stroll down memory lane when these remakes launch later this year. » **Brian Shea**

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Role-Player
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
ILCA, Game Freak

» Release
Late 2021

Mario Golf: Super Rush

Driving onto Switch

There's something about Mario that encourages people to try new genres. How many fighting game fans were born out of Super Smash Bros.? How many racing fans started with Mario Kart? We'd even wager some were introduced to tennis for the first time thanks to Nintendo's mascot. Similarly, many players might not check out sim-based golfing games, but when it comes to Mario Golf: Super Rush, we're excited to hit the links once more.

Like past entries, Super Rush lets you drive down the fairway as your favorite Mushroom Kingdom golfers, including Mario, Luigi, Yoshi, Peach, Waluigi, and Daisy. Intuitive tools allow you to judge wind and surface slope to properly chart the course of your ball, while optional motion controls let you use your Joy-Cons to line up your shot.

Mario Golf: Super Rush also introduces a new mode called Speed Golf where everyone tees off at the same time, then sprints to their ball for the next shot. The goal is to traverse the course and sink your ball in the fastest time using dashes and special shots to gain the upper hand. You can also use character-specific moves, like Mario's ability to blow other players' balls away, to disrupt your opponents' progress.

The other big feature in Super Rush is the welcomed return of the series' popular story mode. Using your Mii, you play through a story with RPG-style progression that allows you to level up various attributes. You not only compete with the Mushroom Kingdom's finest golfers, but also interact with them off the course. Then, you can take your Mii out of story mode and use them in other modes like versus.

With so many approachable modes to supplement the series' traditionally solid core mechanics, Mario Golf: Super Rush looks like an appealing package for golfing enthusiasts and newcomers alike. » **Brian Shea**

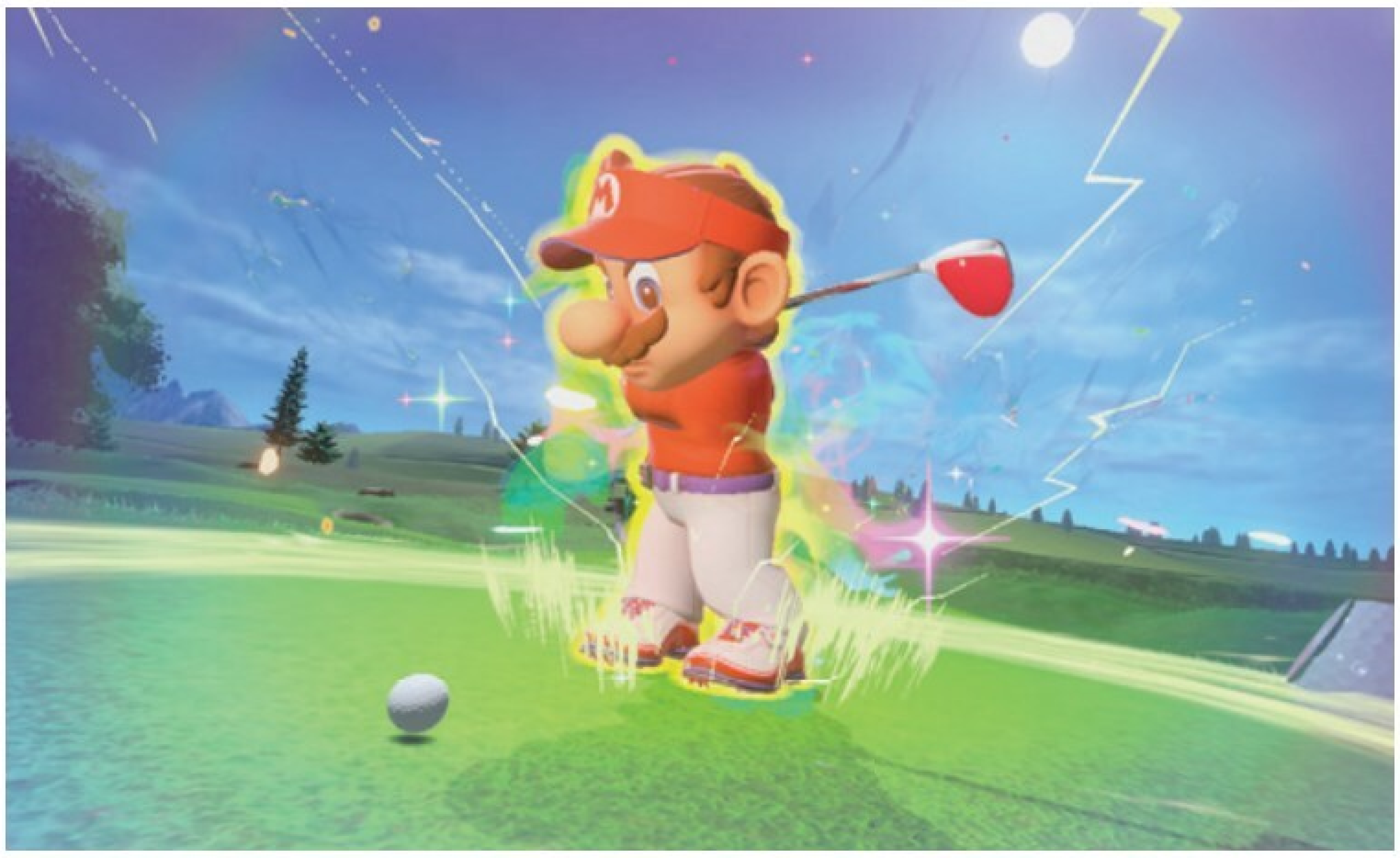
» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Camelot

» Release
June 25



Solar Ash

Chasing the flow

» Platform
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Annapurna Interactive

» Developer
Heart Machine

» Release
2021

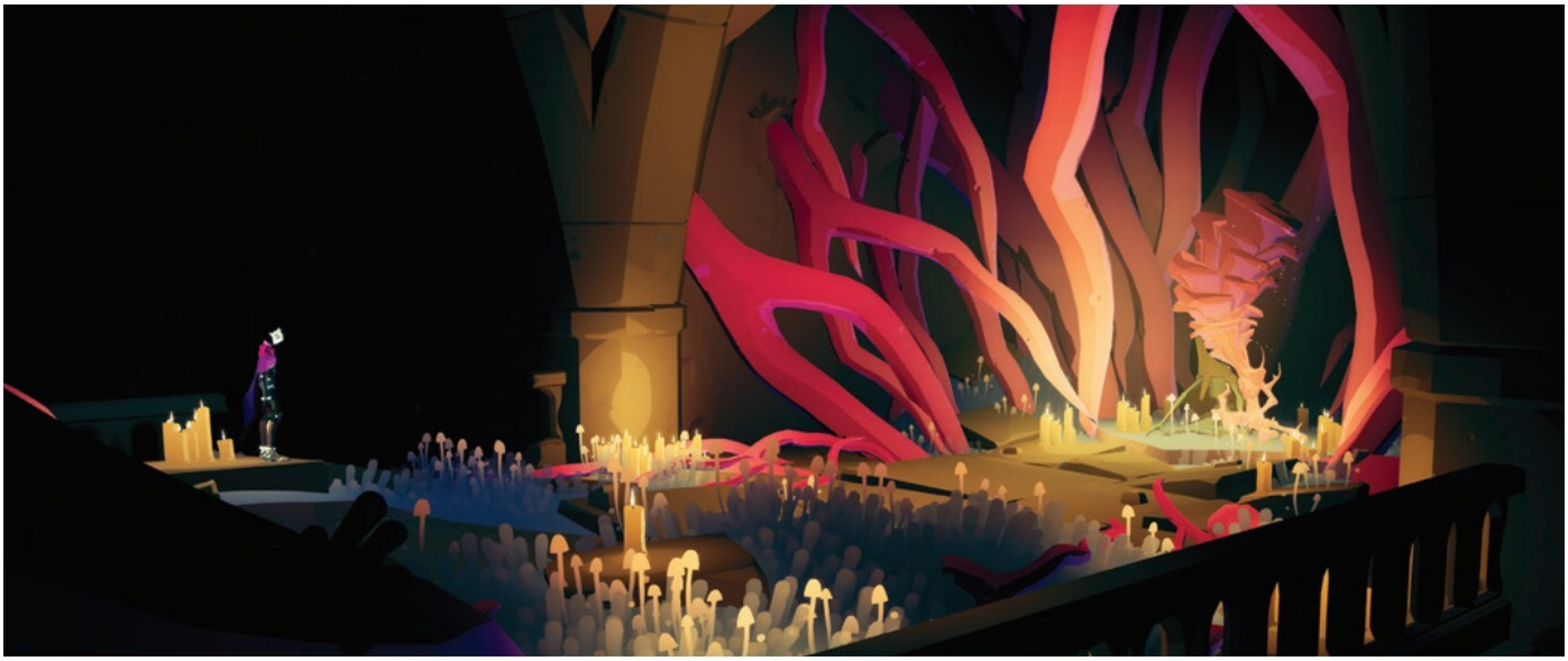
Ever since the release of Hyper Light Drifter in 2016, I've been eager to see where Heart Machine goes next in its game development journey. That debut project showed style and an eye for world-building in equal measures with precise combat and level design. With Solar Ash, the studio is moving in new directions, but with some of the same penchant for surreal imagery and energetic movement that characterized its predecessor.

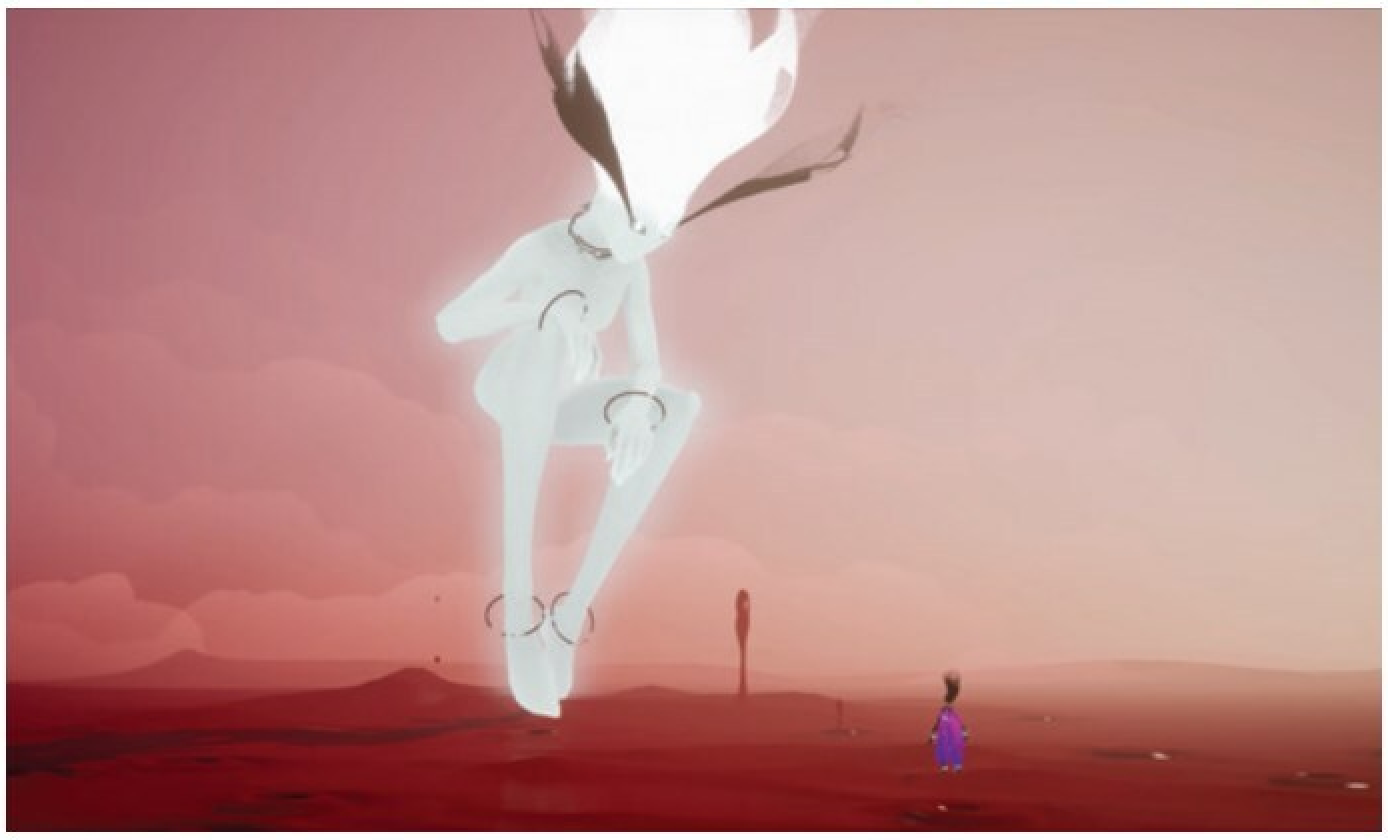
"Solar Ash is a huge 3D platformer focused on speed, movement, and fluidity," says creative director Alx Preston in a recent video presentation. "The game is set inside a giant black hole, known as the Ultravoid, which has been consuming everything in its path." Players control Ray, a "void runner" who enters the black hole in hopes of saving her planet.

The early glimpses I've seen of gameplay strike a strange hybrid tone. The game recalls large 3D traversal games, with inventive navigation and sprawling open spaces inviting exploration. Ray moves through the world as a skater might, sliding along the ground, snagging pick-ups, and flinging out a sort of grapple that propels her across wide gaps. The style of movement is most reminiscent of games like Jet Set Radio, with its slick and showy stunts. Ray glides across the ground, climbs walls, and even surfs along the clouds. "We've developed a system with some neat rendering tech to achieve a really fluid, reactive and buoyant experience on the clouds," Preston says. "It has its own gravity system, allowing for some wild movement in every direction. It serves as our large-scale traversal mechanic across the fairly big world."

That unusual genre-blending quality is further complicated by the presence of nightmarish monsters that must be fought at high speed as Ray zips through the environments. "Our combat system is simple, fast, and built to empower players and encourage flow," Preston says. "As you explore the Ultravoid, enemy encounters will scale to greater and greater sizes. Some of these creatures require speed and precise timing to defeat." And on that last point, just for one more especially intriguing wrinkle, the game also seems to borrow at least some ideas from the iconic Shadow of the Colossus, as the result of these escalating encounters are a series of massive sentinel creatures so big that Ray actually platforms along their moving bodies through the course of battling them.

Heart Machine has flirted with deeper themes in its prior work. And it's apparent that Solar Ash is aiming to follow suit. Preston told me that the game is "about letting go and moving on," an idea that is communicated figuratively with the main character's blind leap into an unknowable void. Early glimpses of Solar Ash present a mesmerizing vision, and I'm hoping that those visuals, combined with the free-flowing gameplay the team has started to reveal, add up to an especially exciting adventure when the game hits PlayStation consoles and PC later this year. » **Matt Miller**





Fights In Tight Spaces

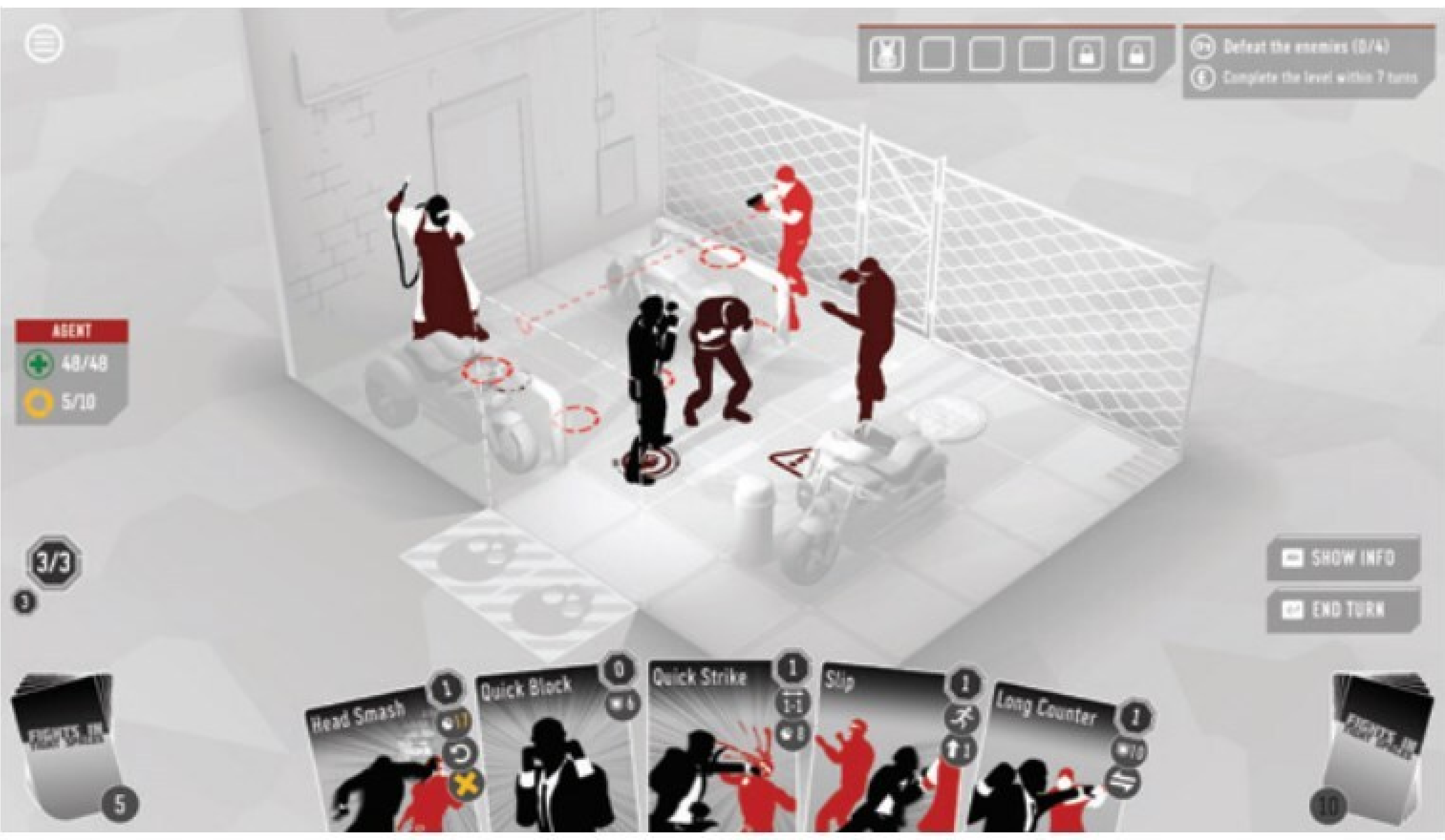
Planning your punches

Fights in Tight Spaces demonstrates that taking down a room full of enemies using slick martial arts is as much of a mental game as it is a physical one. The striking strategy game has made waves since launching in Steam Early Access in December by translating action-movie style combat encounters into a deck-based, turn-based strategy affair that has managed to appease fans of both styles.

Fights in Tight Spaces comes courtesy of Ground Shatter, a small development team based in the UK. Players control an agent and must fight their way through waves of bikers, ninjas, and other foes within small spaces. These areas include kitchens, alleyways, tattoo shops, and bathrooms. You're armed with a deck of cards used to execute a wide array of offensive actions such as a roundhouse kick or a spinning back fist. There are also cards for blocking and movement, such as slipping behind foes. Stringing together moves strategically is key as is reading the room and determining how to use its layout to your advantage.

For example, certain attacks push enemies into other tiles which you can use to, say, kick a bad guy into the path of his partner's line of fire. One card lets you smash an opponent's head against adjacent surfaces, and another executes a wall-running jump kick. Ground Shatter hopes to expand on interactive environments by creating cards that let players use pick up objects to use as weapons. Performing pick-up attacks in succession builds a combo meter that can be spent to execute powerful special moves.

Planning attacks by anticipating enemy responses is a blast, especially if you're a fan of similarly designed titles like Into the Breach and Slay the Spire. When the battle concludes, the entire fight plays out in real-time to show you just how cool (or awkward) you really looked.



Creator James Parker cites action films like *The Raid: Redemption*, *Rumble in the Bronx*, as well as specific sequences like the bathroom fight in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*, as inspirations. The team began by cherry-picking the coolest moves from its favorite movies, then determined how they could meet required functions in-game. With such influences, one might wonder why Ground Shatter didn't just make a traditional action game, but Parker points to the planning sequences from the Sherlock Holmes films starring Robert Downey Jr. as an influence for the game's strategic approach.

"The fantasy of being a character like that is that you kind of understand that they are planning out all of this fight in advance in their head, and then they're just carrying [it] out in real-time" says Parker.

In addition to Steam Early Access, Fights in Tight Spaces is available on Epic Games Store and Xbox Game Preview and in a separate free Prologue chapter. Ground Shatter is targeting six months of Early Access where it'll update the game with new cards, levels, and enemies. The game will launch on PC and presumably Xbox, with other platforms to be determined. Fights in Tight Spaces is already in an enjoyable state, so strategy fans interested in a more stylish take on the genre should definitely keep an eye on this one.

» **Marcus Stewart**

» Platform
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy

» Publisher
Mode 7

» Developer
Ground Shatter

» Release
TBA

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Return to Midgar (again)

» Platform
PS5

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
June 10

Final Fantasy VII Remake was one of the most acclaimed games of last year, reimagining the classic RPG in clever ways that appealed to new players and old fans. However, the remake's story stopped as Cloud and his companions left the city of Midgar, which means future installments still have a lot of the original game's plot to cover. While Square Enix isn't revealing any details about the next full entry, the company did announce Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade – a new version of the 2020 game optimized for PlayStation 5, with some extra content to tide us over while we wait for the main story to continue.

If you've already played Final Fantasy VII Remake, then Intergrade's biggest draw is the new story sequence starring Yuffie, one of the original Final Fantasy VII party members who hasn't surfaced in the remake yet. Her two-chapter story runs parallel to events in the main game, and involves her and a partner – another ninja from Wutai named Sonon – collaborating with Avalanche HQ to steal Shinra's most powerful materia. This time, combat doesn't involve switching between characters; players always control Yuffie with her huge shuriken, but can also issue commands to Sonon and initiate team combos with him. This should give fights a slightly different flavor for this arc, even if many of the battle system fundamentals remain the same.

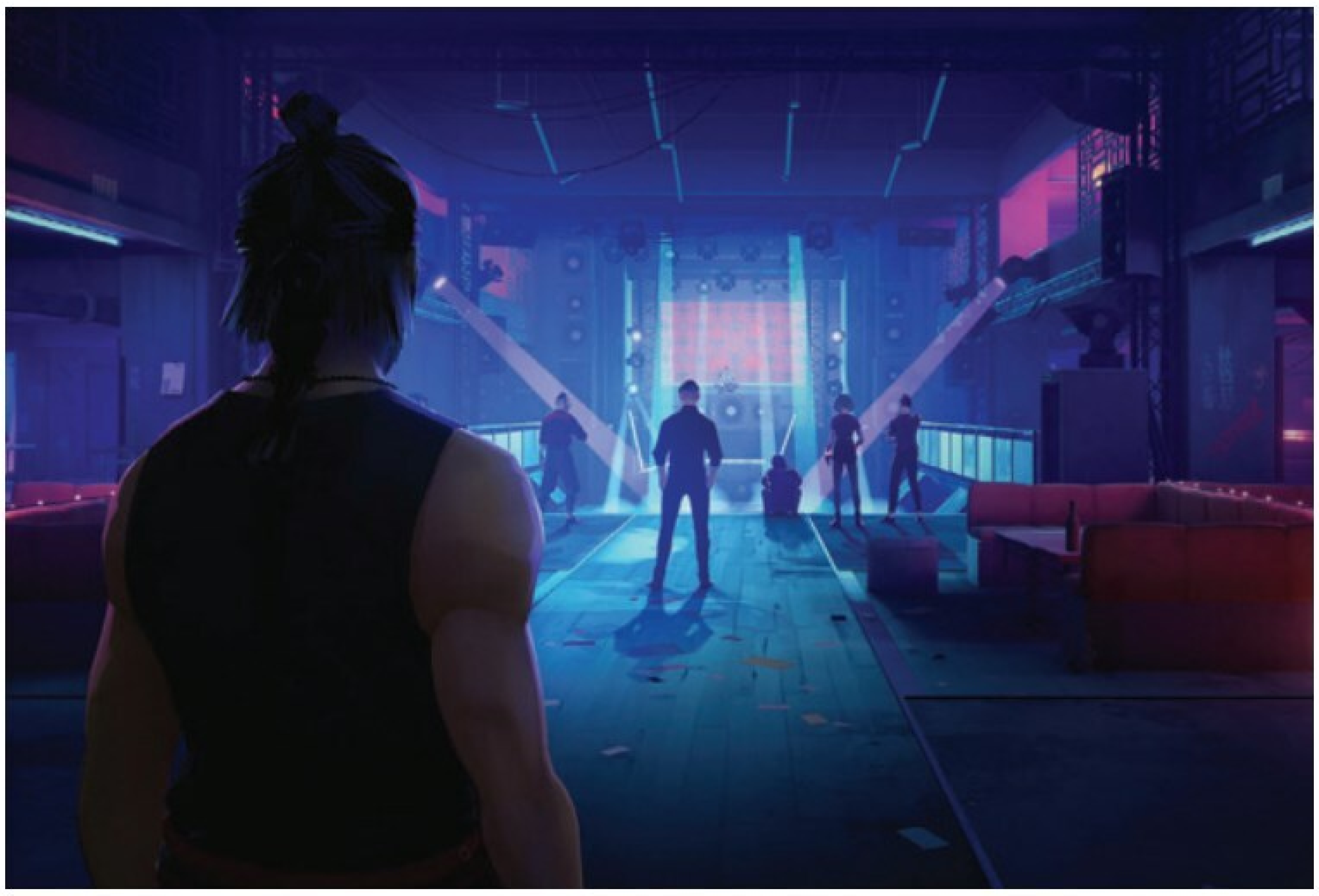
Apart from Yuffie's additional story, Intergrade also has new improvements throughout the whole experience that take advantage of the PS5 hardware. You can choose between two visual modes; one prioritizes 4K visuals, while the other performs at a smooth 60 FPS. The lighting and textures are enhanced, more environmental effects (like fog) are present, and Square Enix added a photo mode so you can stylishly capture memorable moments. The base game also has an exciting new boss for Cloud to fight in the battle simulator: Weiss, the antagonist from PS2's Final Fantasy VII spin-off, Dirge of Cerberus.

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade launches on June 10 for PS5, and that version comes bundled with the new Yuffie episode. However, if you already purchased the PS4 version of Final Fantasy VII Remake, you can upgrade to PS5 for free and get all the performance improvements – but you will have to buy the Yuffie episode separately (which is not releasing on PS4). To further complicate matters, players who grabbed the PS4 version in March when it was a free PlayStation Plus title aren't eligible for the upgrade. Lastly, if you own the PS4 game on disc, but only have the digital-only PS5, you also can't take advantage of the upgrade.

Those restrictions are confusing at first, but ultimately, Square Enix is making an effort to reward players who already purchased last year's game – including allowing save files to carry over from the old version to the new one. So, if you've played the game already, you keep all your progress as you check out what's new. If you just want to dive into Yuffie's story, Intergrade will allow you to do that too; it is available right from main menu, so you don't need to reach a certain point in the core story to unlock it. But considering how much fun it was to return to Midgar with Final Fantasy VII Remake last year, it may be the right time for another playthough when Intergrade arrives. **» Joe Juba**

Sifu

Be water, my friend



» Platform
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sloclap

» Developer
Sloclap

» Release
2021

Sloclap, the developer behind 2017's Absolver, returned to the indie spotlight during PlayStation's State of Play showcase in February. Sifu, the studio's next third-person action title, looks to weave a more personal tale than its predecessor; one of loss and, ultimately, vengeance. The hand-drawn art style and soft color palette complement the dark story. Over the course of one day, players are tasked with navigating a fictional cityscape in China where waves of ruthless goons skulk in suburban alleyways, abandoned corporate towers, and underground death arenas. Their primary objective: To stop you from finding and defeating the mysterious group of assassins that murdered your family. Unlike with Absolver, Sloclap has expressed an interest in creating a single-player, narrative-driven experience with Sifu that prioritizes emotional themes through gritty set pieces and action sequences.

Pak-Mei Kung Fu, an ancient martial arts style notable for its explosivity and compounded movements, will serve as your primary weapon. And based on the gameplay footage revealed during the showcase, combo chains will be the optimal way to subdue foes. For instance, counters lead to stuns and stuns lead to devastating finishers. Moreover, adaptation is your most important key to survival, as some enemies may ambush you from unsuspecting positions while others close in with a variety of blunt and sharp weapons. Disarming your adversaries and using their melee armaments against them is highly advised. You can also pin opponents against walls for quick takedowns, throw miscellaneous items to incapacitate them, or fling them through windows and off ledges into the crowded metropolitan depths below. In between each intense close-quarters combat scenario, you unlock unique skills you can use on your journey.

The warpath of revenge, however, does come at a heavy cost: your time. A mystical amulet hanging around your neck revives you if engagements with grunts or bosses go south. Sure, you can hop right back into the action (you're literally resurrected in the exact same spot that you were killed in), but this death-defying ability ages you incrementally. A beard slowly emerges from your once clean-shaven, boyish face. After a bevy of defeats, you find that you've become a bitter old man still fueled by the flames of senseless violence. Sifu's executive producer Pierre Tarno promises that this won't weaken your physical prowess. This aging mechanic is not only indicative of the many years that it takes to master Kung Fu, it's also an impactful visual reminder that a life committed to retribution can very easily become a never-ending curse.

» Jason Guisao

Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance

Going back to the source

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Wizards of the Coast

» Developer
Tuque Games

» Release
June 22

Video games using the Dungeons & Dragons license have a long history, and include some standout classics, as well as a few real stumbles. The early 2000s had a spin-off from the Baldur's Gate series with the Dark Alliance games, which focused on fast-paced action and cooperative play – and those releases fit comfortably into the former positive category, with lots of loot, monsters, and magic. Tuque Games is looking to revive those core tenets in its new take on Dark Alliance, while also borrowing some of the most familiar and popular characters from the D&D canon.

In the new game, players take on the role of the Companions of the Hall at the height of their adventuring careers, shortly after the events of one of the early books in which they appeared. The tight-knit adventuring group is best known for its most famous member, Drizzt Do'Urden, the drow ranger whose flashing scimitars and swashbuckling deeds have made him a popular hero for decades. The four-player online-enabled co-op allows his closest friends to join in on the action, including barbarian Wulfgar, the gruff dwarf Bruenor, and the talented archer Cattie-brie.

In a hands-on demo, I take control of Drizzt from the team's home base of Kelvin's Cairn, where it's easy to pause and level up, purchase or upgrade gear, as well as select new missions and teleport to one of the 21 distinct missions the game offers. My demo partner is Kevin Neibert, lead game designer at Tuque Games, whose ranged skill set playing as Cattie-brie acts as a counterpoint to my quick slashing melee and stealth abilities. "We've created a system we're calling emergent combat," Neibert says. "What it basically means is we want you to be able to link together your own moves, make your own combos, and make you feel really powerful, without having to memorize a whole list of various combos, like from a fighting game." Almost instantly, I get a sense for the easy flow of combat maneuvers, which encourage experimentation and regularly change things up. Among other options, I can shadow step into invisibility to sneak behind enemies, or once an ultimate meter builds up, summon my black panther, Guenhwyvar, into the battle for a burst of devastating slashes. My battles are fast-paced and simple, but reward smart play, like guaranteed critical hits for striking a foe from behind.

The mission we confront puts us into conflict with an array of goblins and verbeeg giant-kin, and the cinematic sequences, as well as the lore tablets found along the way, help convince me that Tuque is putting a healthy dose of Forgotten Realms D&D lore into the mix, including fleshing out the monster cultures in some fun ways.

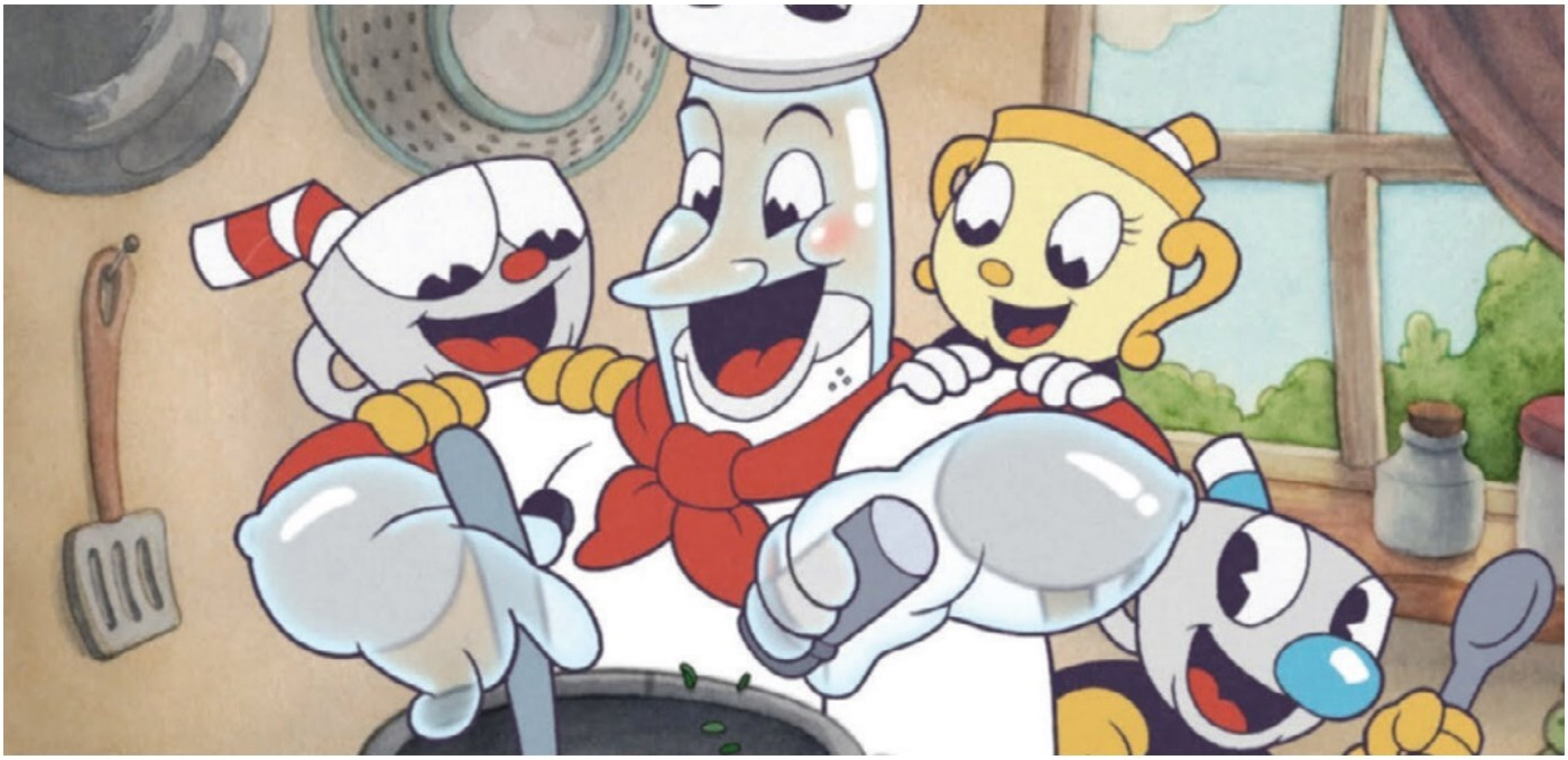
"I'm really proud of what the team has done," Neibert says. "All of the monsters in the game, except one or two, are directly taken from the *Monster Manual*. We were able to take our own twists on them, and sort of make them come to life."

In addition to offering difficulty tiers to customize challenge, players are also regularly given a choice after a big fight to either take a short rest, or power through and have an increased chance for better loot. On that front, every one of the four characters has 12 unique gear sets to chase, each with multiple levels of rarity, and each offering distinct visuals. Even in the short time I played, I was already eager to try and chase those powerful synergy bonuses that come from tracking down multiple items in the same outfit.

Beyond solid action and a bounty of unique loot to chase, Dark Alliance also puts a big focus on the cooperative experience. Players can easily join friends online, but the game also supports a quick-join option to hop into other players' games who have set their sessions to public availability. And once you're in, players can expect fully instanced loot specific to their character that only they can pick up. "We want to make sure that you don't ruin any friendships while you're playing," Neibert jokes. As new players join the party, the game dynamically scales up enemy health and damage, so you can have confidence in a solidly balanced adventure, whether you're running solo or with a full four-person wrecking crew.

After slicing our way through a horde of baddies, it was back to Kelvin's Cairn to leverage some of our acquired gold for gear upgrades, and also to level up, including the option to select specific ability scores and feats to set my version of Drizzt apart from other players. After setting down my twin scimitars, I left my demo of Dark Alliance with a sense that Tuque has fashioned a highly playable, if very familiar, mix of action, looting, and progression. The hacking and slashing carried just enough complexity to keep things engaging, while remaining light enough that I can imagine carrying on a conversation with friends as I live out this particular monster-hunting combat fantasy. D&D has no shortage of great settings and characters that are well suited to this sort of action adventure; I hope Dark Alliance hits the sweet spot early this summer, so we might see more from this resurrected battler down the road. » **Matt Miller**

PS5
MORTAL SHELL ENHANCED EDITION
ALSO ON PS4/XBOX
PS4
POISON CONTROL
ALSO ON SWITCH
XBOX ONE
WRC 9 THE OFFICIAL GAME
ALSO ON PS4/PS5/SWITCH
XBOX
R-TYPE FINAL 2 INAUGURAL FLIGHT EDITION
ALSO ON PS4/SWITCH
PURE POOL
PS4
TERRA TRILOGY 3-GAMES-IN-1
ALSO ON SWITCH
PS4
CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER
ALSO ON SWITCH
CHESS ULTRA
LOST WORDS BEYOND THE PAGE
COMING IN APRIL
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org



Cuphead: The Delicious Last Course

Something vile is happening on Inkwell Isle, so the dynamic duo of Cuphead and Mugman might need a little help overcoming this new breed of dastardly villain. Enter Ms. Chalice, who joins the chaos in the DLC for Studio MDHR's brutal-yet-gorgeous side-scrolling shooter. Not only does Ms. Chalice have a few new moves and abilities, but fans will gain access to a host of additional weapons and charms as they journey through this co-op-friendly adventure. Studio MDHR has been pretty dark on the title since it slipped past its original 2020 release window, so hopefully we'll get an update soon.

Instinction

Fans of Capcom's PS1-era survival-horror series Dino Crisis should keep their eye on Instinction. In this first or third-person shooter, players take on the role of one of three salvage crew members locked in a battle for survival after touching down on a mysterious dinosaur-infested land. Developer Hashbane calls this a "semi-open world" game, and players will be able to work through the campaign solo or with a couple of friends. Either way, you'll have to scavenge for weapons, upgrades, and supplies before taking on these terrible thunder lizards. Fortunately, you're safe for a little while; Instinction is set for release on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, and PC sometime in 2022.

Nobody Saves The World

Drinkbox is best known for its work on the Guacamelee! series, which wore Metroid inspirations on its sleeve, but the team's newest title looks more like The Legend of Zelda franchise. In this wacky place, a nondescript character named Nobody has been tasked with saving the world. However, Nobody doesn't have any powers. Fortunately, using a magic wand, they can transform into a variety of different classes that range from the standard Ranger and Magician to the absurd Mermaid, Horse, and Egg. As Nobody works through a series of randomly-generated dungeons, they'll unlock new hero classes and eventually be able to mix-and-match abilities between hero types. Nobody Saves The World is set to launch on the Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC sometime later this year.

Splatoon 3

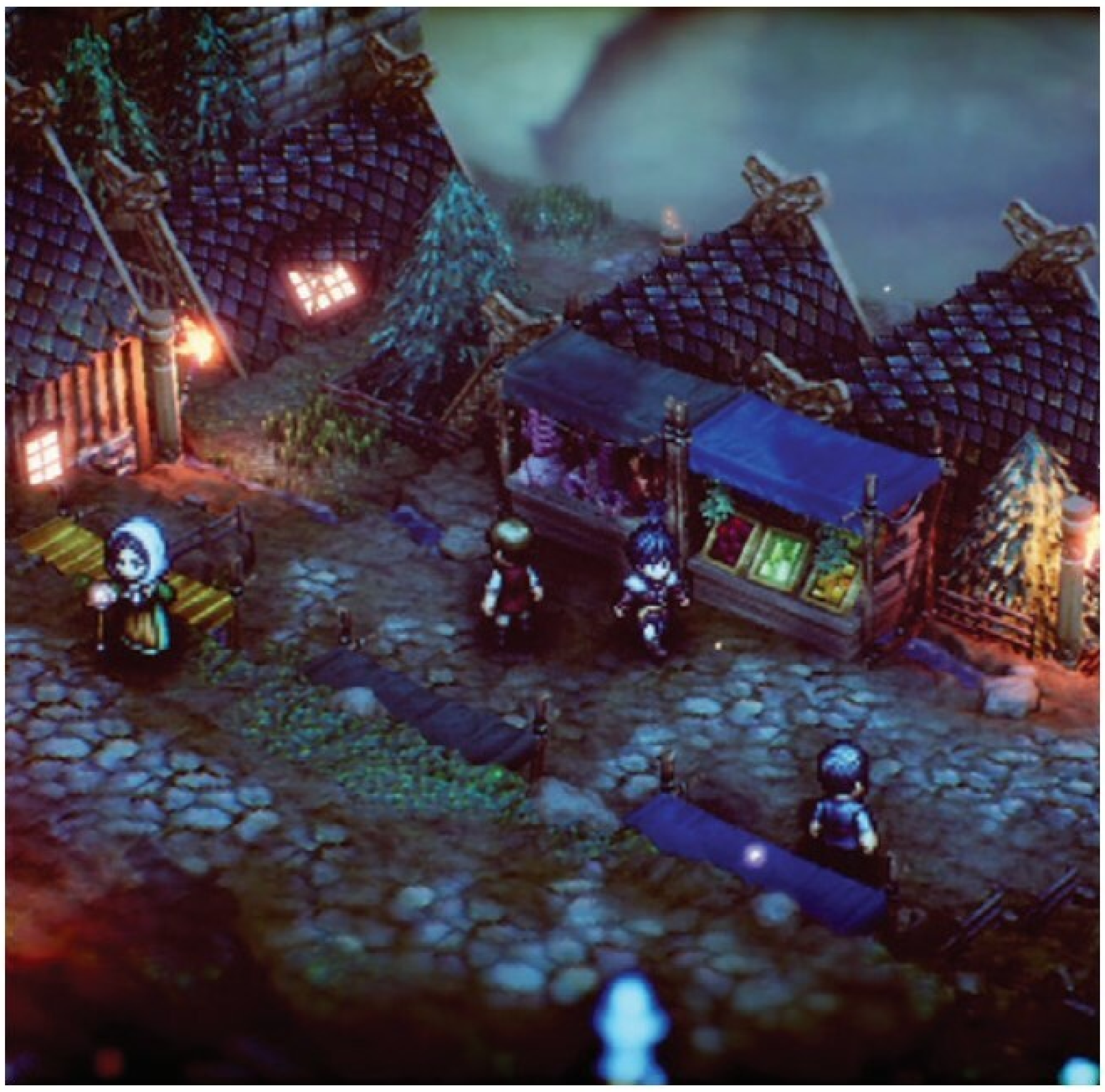
We don't know much about Splatoon 3, but it looks to flip the script on the established formula. Players leave Inkopolis behind as they head out to a new region called the Splatlands. Splatville is the center of the Splatlands and serves as the battle hub. Splatoon 3 introduces new weapons, customization options, and movement abilities into the 4v4 madness of the series' trademark Turf Wars. It comes to Switch in 2022.

World's End Club

The writers behind the Zero Escape and Danganronpa series have teamed up for a new twisted adventure where a group of misfit students from Japan get trapped in an underwater theme park and are forced to play in the "Game of Fate." The name says it all: Their goal is to merely survive, but at what cost? Apparently, friendships will be tested as the stakes rise and mysterious powers awaken within them. World's End Club hits the Switch on May 28.

The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD

As part of the series' 35th anniversary celebration, Nintendo announced a remaster of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. Serving as the earliest game in the official Zelda timeline, Skyward Sword tells an origin tale including the creation of the Master Sword and the evil entity that preceded Ganon. This version features 60 FPS performance, improved graphics, and the ability to play with motion controls or a new button-only scheme. Skyward Sword HD comes to Switch on July 16.

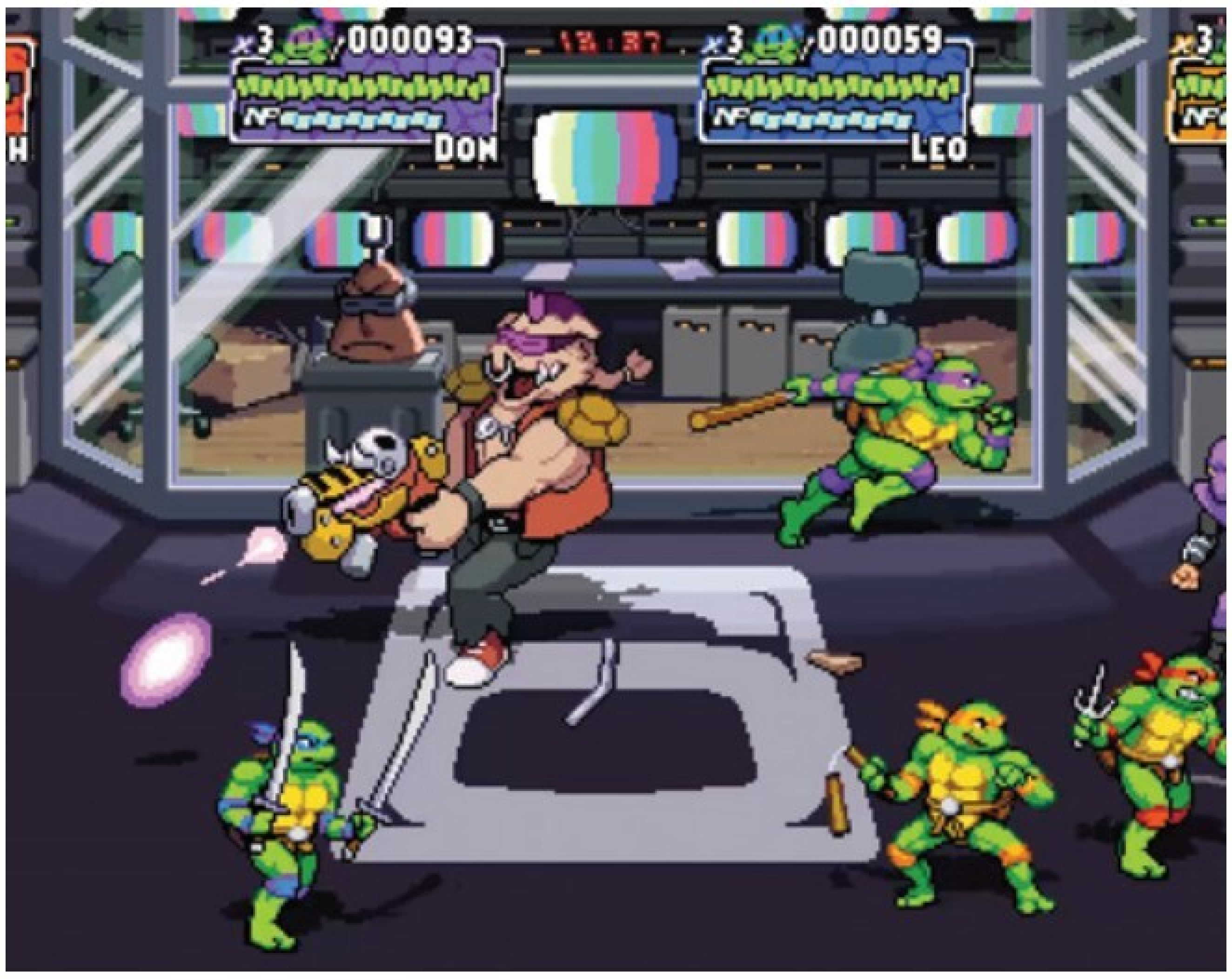


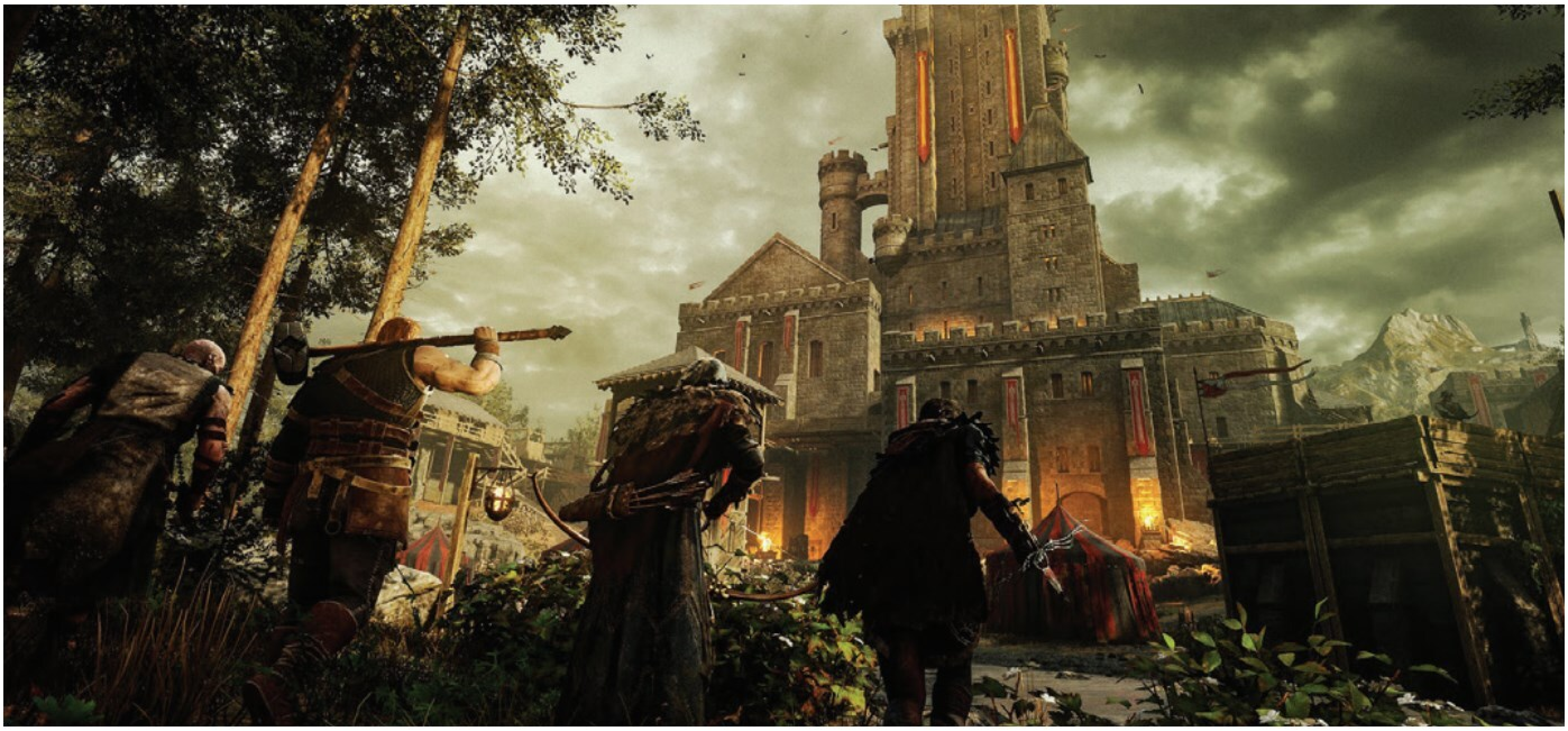
Project Triangle Strategy (Working Title)

This strategy/RPG from the Octopath Traveler team is turning heads thanks to a promising demo. You make decisions that bolster different convictions of your party – utility, mortality, and liberty, which influence the protagonist's worldview and which characters join you. The tactical combat focuses on positioning, flanking enemies for follow-up attacks, and elemental chain reactions. Project Triangle Strategy launches on Switch next year.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge

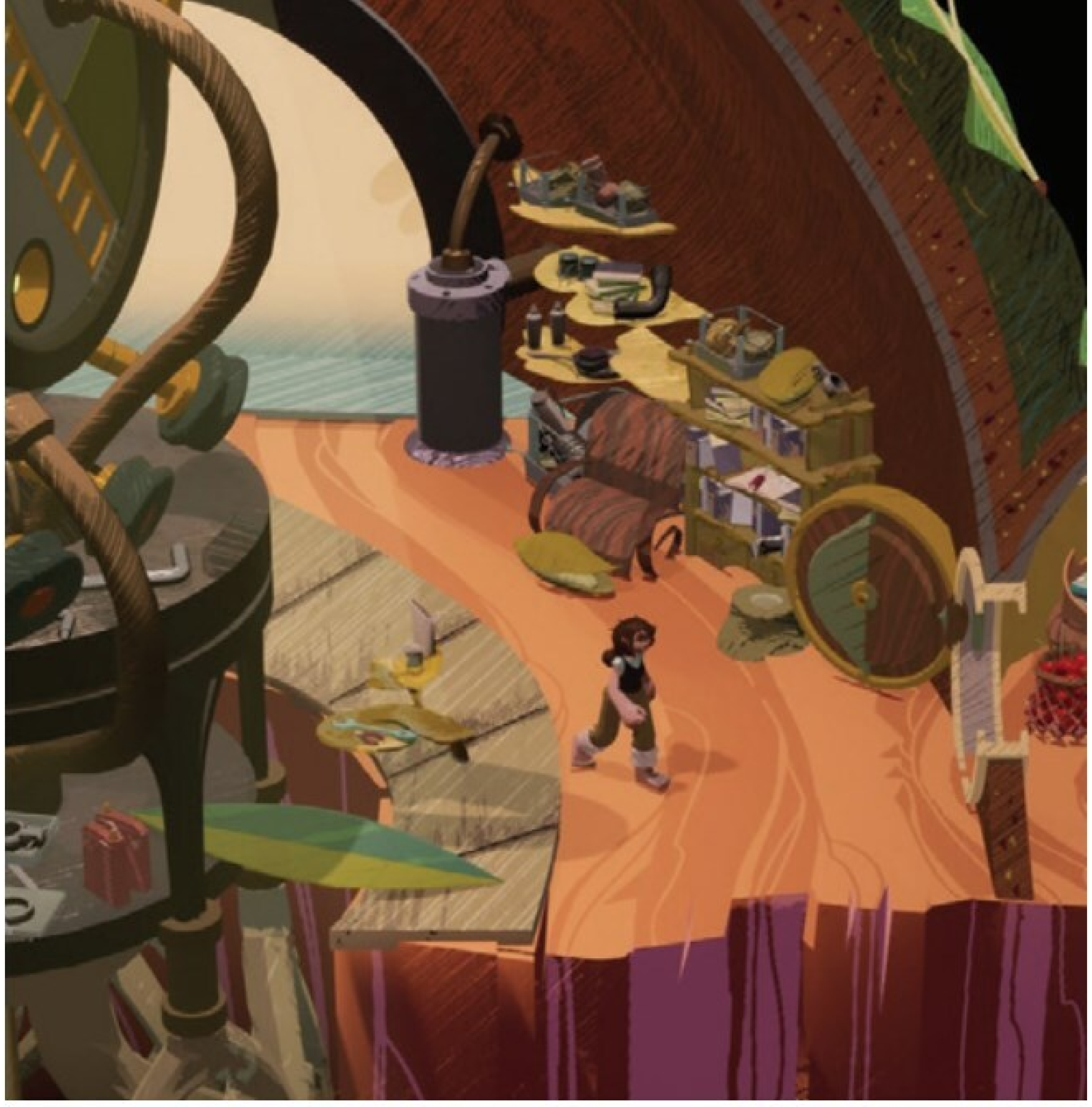
Fans of the classic TMNT arcade games rejoice! The Turtles are back in a new, retro-inspired beat 'em up called Shredder's Revenge. Developed by Tribute Games (Mercenary Kings) and published by Dotemu (Streets of Rage 4), Shredder's Revenge is an original, four-player adventure based on the beloved 1987 cartoon. Players can join up either locally or online to beat the shell out of evildoers like the Foot Clan, Krang, and Shredder himself. The game doesn't have a release window, but both old and new-school TMNT fans should get a kick out of Shredder's Revenge when it comes to unspecified consoles and PC.





Hood: Outlaws & Legends

Hood: Outlaws & Legends blends PvPvE multiplayer with the lore of Robin Hood to create a unique, heist-focused competitive multiplayer experience. Two teams of four human-controlled players must compete to infiltrate forts and other areas to steal the most riches and make it out in one piece. The catch, though, is that both teams must also combat the A.I.-controlled guards patrolling these areas. Victory depends on how teams juggle the four classes (Ranger, Brawler, Mystic, and Hunter) to successfully slip in and out while lining their pockets as much as possible. Hood: Outlaws & Legends launches on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC on May 10.

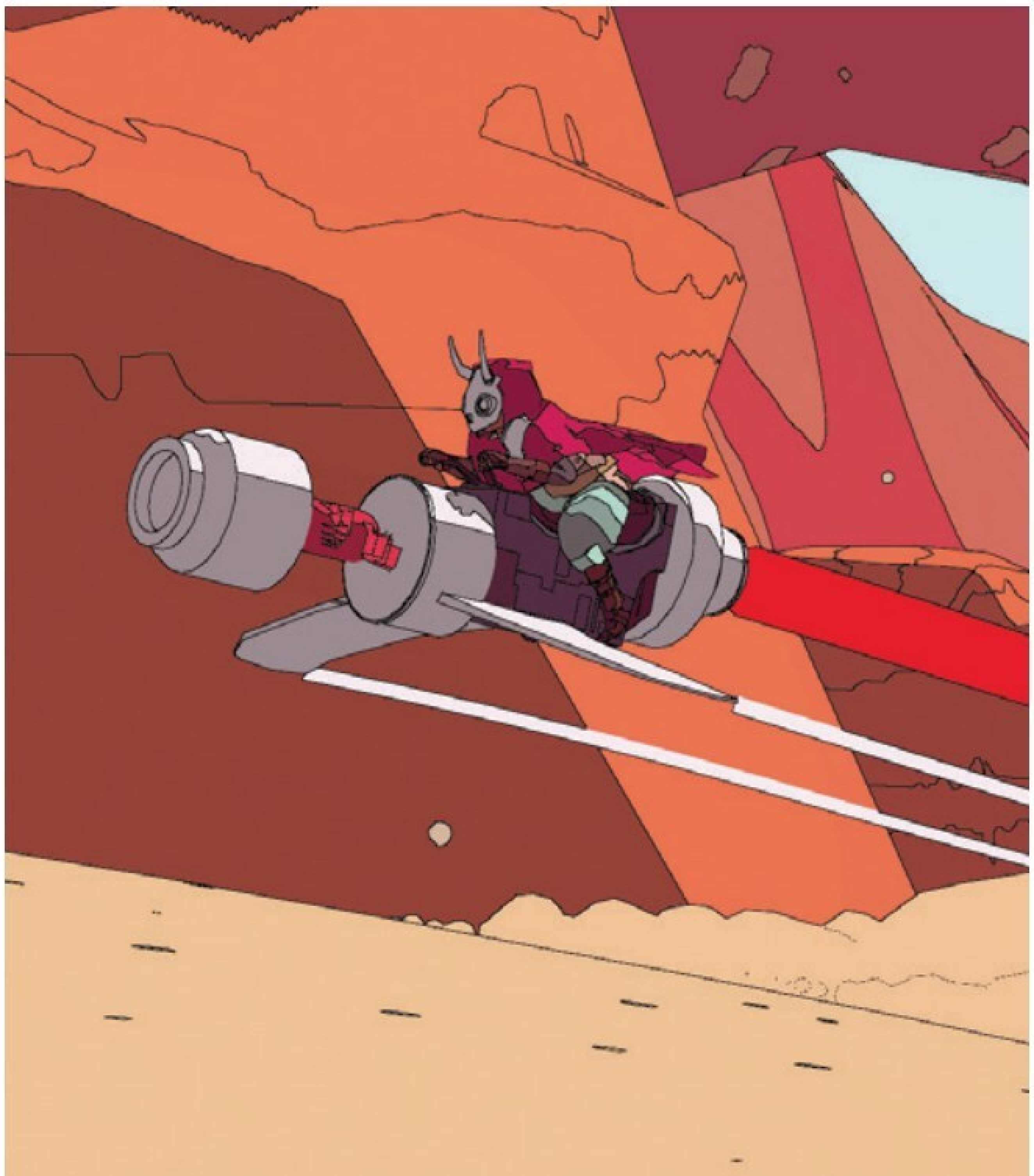


Stonefly

Stonefly is the next game from Creature in the Well developer Flight School Studio, developer of Creature in the Well. Described as “a chill and tranquil action adventure game,” you take control of a bug-sized mech while fighting real bugs to scavenge for parts and resources. Stonefly’s inspirations are all over the place – ranging from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to Super Smash Bros. – and the result is an intriguing looking game that invites the player to explore its fauna and world while trying to beat its tiny-yet-dangerous opponents. Stonefly will be out this summer on console and PC.

Sable

From developer Shedworks, Sable tells the story of, well, Sable, as she travels around an expansive desert, interacting with other nomads, and discovering the mysteries of ancient times. While the game looks great, one of the more interesting aspects of its development is who’s composing its soundtrack. Michelle Zauner, known for fronting the indie rock band Japanese Breakfast, is writing Sable’s score, which she told *Polygon* will sound as beautiful and inviting as the game looks.



If You Purchased Certain Dollar General DG Auto Brand Motor Oil Product(s)

You could get money from a Class Action Settlement.

Para una notificación en Español, por favor llame o visite nuestro website.

What is this about?

A settlement has been proposed in a class action lawsuit claiming that Dollar General Corporation, Dolgencorp, LLP, and DG Retail, LLC (“Defendants”) deceptively marketed, advertised, and sold DG Auto motor oils that were obsolete and potentially harmful to automobiles. Defendants have agreed not to sell certain motor oil, add additional oversight, and provide money to Settlement Class Members. Defendants deny any wrongdoing.

Who is include in the Settlement?

If you live in the U.S. and purchased any of the DG Auto motor oils below for personal use, not for resale, between September 1, 2010 and December 31, 2017:

- DG SAE 10W-30 (SF specification) for use in vehicles manufactured after 1988; and/or
- DG SAE 10W-40 (SF specification) for use in vehicles manufactured after 1988; and/or
- DG SAE 30 (SA specification) for use in vehicles manufactured after 1930.

What does the Settlement provide?

The Settlement provides:

- **Partial Refund Benefits, No Proof of Purchase**: Get up to $1.68 per quart for up to 10 quarts per Household (maximum $16.80 per Household).
- **Full Refund Benefits, With Proof of Purchase:** Get up to a full refund for the amounts paid for each quart purchased with valid Proof(s) of Purchase.
- **Property Damage Benefits:** Get reimbursed for damage from using the DG Auto motor oil in a vehicle built after 1988 or 1930. The amount will vary depending on vehicle age, mileage, damage, and documentation provided. Visit the website or call the toll-free number for details.

You may file a Claim for Partial or Full Refund Benefits, but not both. If you file a Claim for Refund Benefits, you can file a Claim for Property Damage Benefits. The Settlement provides up to $28,500,000 to pay Valid Claims. The amount paid to Settlement Class Members may depend on the number of Valid Claims submitted and other adjustments by the Settlement Administrator.

What are my rights?

- You must submit a Claim Form to get money from the Settlement. Partial Refund and Full Refund Benefits Claim Forms must be submitted online by **June 8, 2021 at 11:59 p.m. CT** or postmarked by **June 8, 2021**. Property Damage Benefits Claim Forms must be submitted online by **August 23, 2021 at 11:59 p.m. CT** or postmarked no later than **August 23, 2021**.
- **Do nothing**, stay in the Settlement, get no money, and give up your rights to sue.
- **Exclude yourself**, keep your right to sue about the claims in this lawsuit, but you get no money. You must submit your exclusion request postmarked by **May 10, 2021**.
- Stay in the Settlement but tell the Court why you don’t like it. You must submit your objection by **May 10, 2021**. Details on how to object are on the website.

A Final Approval Hearing will be held in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri, 400 E. 9th Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64106 in the courtroom of the Hon. Gary A. Fenner (Courtroom 8A), on **June 22, 2021** at **10:00 a.m.**, to decide whether to approve the Settlement and to award Class Counsel attorneys’ fees and expenses of up to $10,000,000, and up to $135,000 for Class Representatives. The Motion for Attorneys’ Fees and Expenses will be posted on the website. You may hire an attorney, at your own expense, but you don’t have to. Claims will be paid only if the Settlement is approved and all appeals are resolved.

This is only a summary. For more information, visit **www.DGmotoroilsettlement.com** or call **1-833-326-0769**.

www.DGmotoroilsettlement.com
1-833-326-0769

EDITORS' CHOICE

ISSUE 335

80 It Takes Two

It Takes Two is one of the best cooperative games ever made. It demands teamwork, communication, patience, and gives each player unique functionality to ensure no one is doing more or less than the other. Developer Hazelight also impresses with a heartfelt story that speaks to different stages of love and what it takes to stay together.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Tourists.

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Monster Hunter Rise

Runt of the litter

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 26 **Rating** T

7.75

Switch

» Concept
Defend your village from angry monster hordes while spending quality time with your growing roster of lovable palicoes and palamutes

» Graphics
Character textures don't always look great, but the world itself is vivid

» Sound
From gentle vocal harmonies to blood-pumping battle themes, Monster Hunter Rise boasts the best soundtrack in the franchise to date

» Playability
Zipping through each backdrop with the wirebug makes you feel like a nimble acrobat, and controlling mounted monsters feels satisfying

» Entertainment
Fighting different beasts is always a blast. However, the time you spend outside of combat pales in comparison to your epic encounters

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Monster Hunter: World was an important paradigm shift for Capcom's beloved franchise. The well-paced difficulty ramp made progression enjoyable for newcomers, while countless endgame challenges kept expert hunters coming back for more. Monster Hunter Rise's gameplay often attempts to copy World's success, which isn't always a bad thing. Battles continue to be exhilarating dances with death, gear customization is satisfying, and coordinating hunts with friends makes for awesome fun and unexpected outcomes. Even with the introduction of new mechanics that help amplify these features, Monster Hunter Rise struggles to establish a creative identity of its own.

Encounters with huge and impressive beasts is the centerpiece of the experience, putting your skills with the myriad weapon types to the test. Once victorious, you spend your downtime sprinting around the main hub, upgrading or forging better equipment, nabbing a bunch of pending quests from NPCs, and meticulously preparing for the next hunt. This captures the fundamentals of the fantasy-action series, but Monster Hunter Rise doesn't venture far beyond that comfort zone.

During the opening hours, the people of Kamura Village are busy preparing for the "calamity," an army of wild monsters hell-bent on laying waste to everything in their path. As the village's newly registered hunter, you must slay or capture numerous creatures in the biomes beyond your hometown's steel gates. As soon as you're done marveling at the blooming cherry blossom trees and humming along to the gorgeous score, grab key consumables from your ever-expanding item box, eat a delicious meal at the local eatery for exclusive bonuses, and venture forth into the unknown. This routine has a comfortable monotony that Monster Hunter fans will likely appreciate, but the addition of the "Buddy Plaza" adds a new feature to your return trips.

The Buddy Plaza is a base of operations for your palicoes and palamutes (cat and dog warriors, respectively). You can send your trusty pets on missions of their own to procure miscellaneous crafting materials, spend currency to train them so that they'll be more effective in future engagements, swap out their equipment, or hire even more of them by talking to the handler. Buddies are extremely versatile, and Monster Hunter: Rise constantly rewards you for using the plaza's various facilities. Still grinding for that rare beak or tail? Your palico "meowcenaries" might surprise you with one from a recent expedition. This kind of positive feedback gives the lulls between combat and exploration some much-needed flavor.

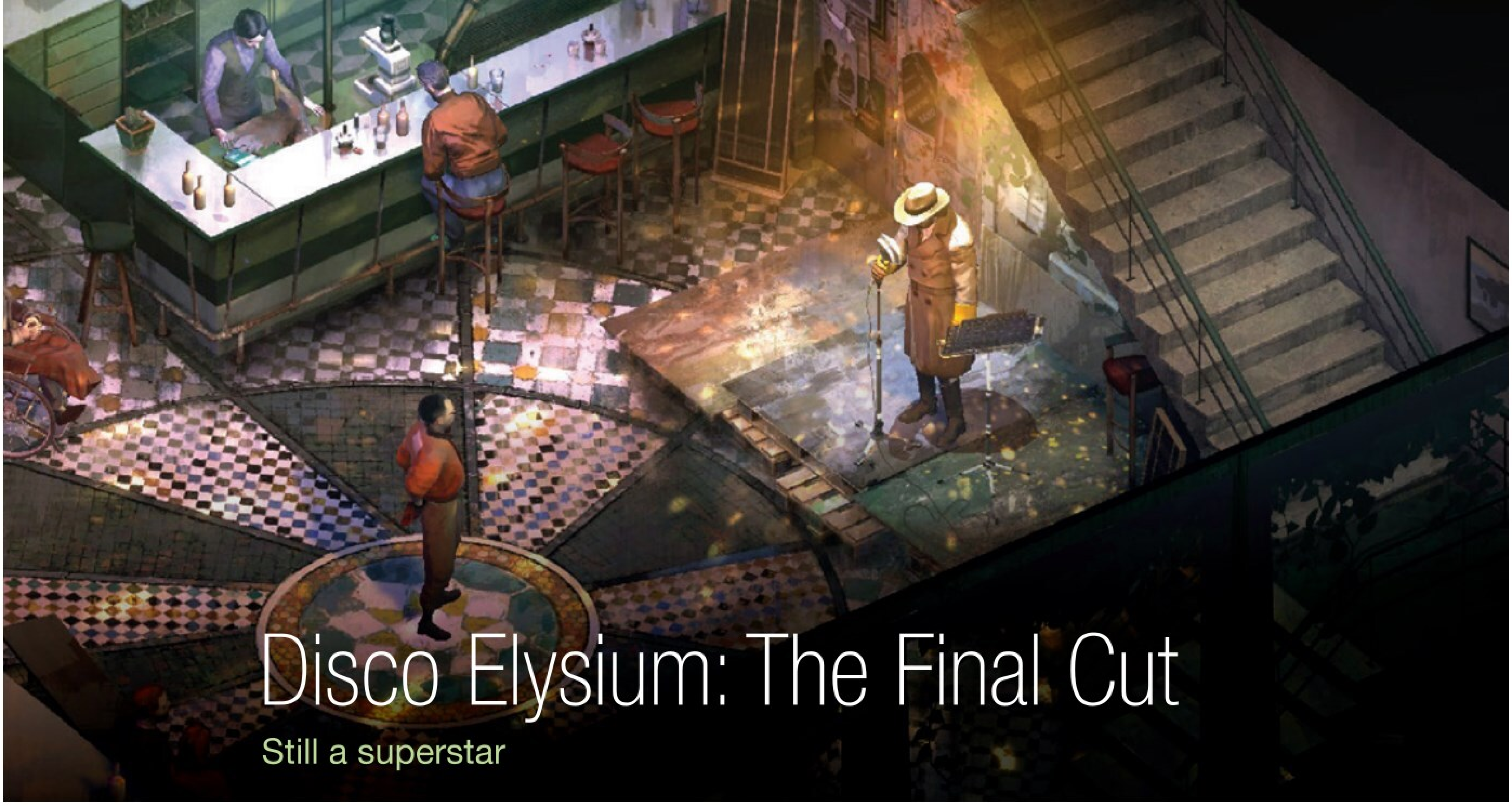
The environments are visually arresting, and house entire ecosystems filled to the brim with endemic life as well as hard-to-find secrets. My two favorite locales – Shrine Ruins and Flooded Forest – are littered with the remnants of ancient civilizations; they have huts wrapped in thick vines and sky-piercing pyramids that loom in the distance. While roaming, I often thought about the histories of these forsaken settlements and the people that once called them home. However, my imagination was often all I had to go on, since the lack of meaningful story beats makes the plot fall flat.

A generic tower defense mode serves a lackluster reminder of the larger narrative; these jarring "rampage quests" involve constructing an array of automated turrets and mountable ballistae around the village's gates. Waves of monsters clutter the screen and work together to pummel you while also breaking through your defenses. All the enemies are damage sponges, and clearing the arena hardly requires much thought; I often just held the fire button until I was the last one standing. Thankfully, you aren't required to complete a ton of rampage quests to gain access to Monster Hunter Rise's main missions.

You spend most of your playthrough experiencing the classic loop: Battle gigantic adversaries like the feral Arzuros and Lagombi, collect mundane items, and deliver heavy objects to camp. Floating, colorful birds called "Spiribirds" can be absorbed to increase your health, stamina, attack, or defense. These buffs make completing the above-mentioned missions much easier. Don't want to do all of that on foot? Ride your palamute to expedite navigation or whip out your wirebug to scale cliffsides and mountain ranges in seconds.

Wirebug attacks, called Silkbinds, add a new layer of intensity to the action. When used repeatedly, Silkbinds force monsters into a mountable state. These short combat sequences are all about using a monster's power against them by ramming into nearby structures for stagger damage or sprinting towards other unsuspecting adversaries to dish out the pain. Wyvern-riding is my favorite mechanic because it adds an exciting burst of strategy to the franchise's age-old combat system.

Beyond mounting monsters and using the wirebug to wall-run in spectacular fashion, not much else distinguishes Monster Hunter Rise from the installments that came before. It has enough endgame content to keep you occupied long after the credits roll (if you don't mind copious amounts of grinding) and multiplayer is still the optimal way to play, but the excitement of my early hunts waned before long. Monster Hunter Rise is far from being the next definitive chapter in the series. Nevertheless, if you're looking for a polished-but-conventional adventure with a few small-scale nuances, then you'll be right at home in Kamura Village.
» Jason Guisao



Disco Elysium: The Final Cut

Still a superstar

9

PS5 • PS4 • PC

» Concept
Update an award-winning game with new features, then bring it to consoles for the first time

» Graphics
The actual character models are unimpressive, but the stunning art direction and evocative world present plenty of gorgeous visuals

» Sound
Full voice acting gives you an even better sense of the characters, with especially great work from the main narrator

» Playability
Adapting a traditional mouse-and-keyboard interface to gamepad involves some trade-offs, but it works (and it's certainly better than not playing at all on console)

» Entertainment
Disco Elysium can be thoughtful, funny, sad, and profound. To see how it artfully navigates that spectrum, you simply need to play it for yourself

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** ZA/UM **Developer** ZA/UM **Release** March 30 **Rating** M

I wish I could play Disco Elysium for the first time again. This unconventional RPG from developer ZA/UM casts a spell unlike any other game; its surprising narrative, complex world, and flawed characters have the power to transport your mind to dark and delightful places. Though Disco Elysium was exclusive to PC when it originally launched in 2019, The Final Cut brings the experience to consoles, opening this strange world up to a new wave of superstar detectives. And even though it can't turn back time for those of us who want to relive the first playthrough, The Final Cut's additions provide a rewarding return trip.

If you're new to Revachol, the main thing you need to know is Disco Elysium is a story-driven, combat-free RPG that puts you in the role of a police officer investigating a bizarre murder. But as the game begins, that police officer has traveled a drug-addled road to destruction. Through your actions and dialogue during the investigation, you veer toward redemption or ruination (or somewhere in between) as you contend with the warring voices in your head. The tone can shift from hilarious to poignant to soul-crushing in the span of a single conversation, but the writing has a particular knack for highlighting beauty amid bleakness. I don't want to say too much and risk spoiling any great moments, but Disco Elysium's unique approach to melding storytelling and gameplay is really something special.

The original version won acclaim from critics and players, but The Final Cut isn't just a re-release. ZA/UM made several important adjustments to refine the game, but my favorite is the inclusion of full voice acting. Instead of just getting a few sentences to paint the outline of the characters, you now get a more complete sense of their personalities and mannerisms. I enjoyed all of the performances, but the main narrator (voiced by Lenval Brown) especially stands out; Disco Elysium is a text-heavy game, and Brown delivers a staggering amount of information with a style that fits the atmosphere perfectly.

While most of the core content remains unchanged in The Final Cut, new political vision quests let players choose one of four new tasks tied to different ideologies. These mutually exclusive quests open up based on your detective's political leanings – like communism and fascism – and you ultimately choose which one you want to pursue. After saving/reloading to see what they all offer, I am impressed at how well these new objectives fold into the original experience. They don't feel tacked-on or extraneous; they are natural extensions of the themes that were already there, acting as satisfying punctuation marks. Some of them introduce new characters and areas, while others let you interact with familiar faces in different contexts. The fascist (a.k.a. racist) thread made me laugh the most, but whichever one you pick, the vision quests are cleverly written and have minor-but-lasting effects on the game once you complete them – like visual changes to the big statue in the roundabout, for example.

As an isometric RPG, controlling Disco Elysium was previously a mouse-and-keyboard affair. That obviously wouldn't work for the console versions, so the interface has been adapted for gamepads (and the PC version supports them now, too). However, the controls are the only part of this package that don't feel improved. The trade-offs aren't exactly surprising; moving your character directly with the analogue stick is nice, but the map was still originally designed with a point-and-click interface in mind, so certain paths through the world are difficult to see and navigate. I also had several instances where I pressed a button to interact with an object, but nothing happened until I repositioned myself and tried again. On the one hand, that inconsistency is frustrating. On the other hand, Disco Elysium is not a game in which rapid action and response is necessary, so it didn't interfere much with my overall enjoyment.

No two run-throughs of Disco Elysium are quite the same. If you're returning to it, The Final Cut is a great opportunity to try out different choices, pursue different ideologies, and see new branches of the story. Plus, if you already own the game on PC, The Final Cut is available as a free update. For console players who have waited to see what the fuss is about, this version presents the complete picture of why this unique setting and story have earned so much praise. Disco Elysium is a must-play game, and The Final Cut is the best (and only, for many people) way to play it. **» Joe Juba**

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut is currently available on PS5, PS4, and PC. It will launch on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and Switch this summer

Story Of Seasons: Pioneers Of Olive Town

Simple comfort over ambition

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Xseed Games **Developer** Marvelous Inc **Release** March 24 **Rating** E

7.5

Switch

» Concept
Make a new life as a farmer while developing a struggling town

» Graphics
The animal designs are all adorable, but the graphics don't stand out

» Sound
The music varies depending on the events of the day and season, but it's mostly unremarkable background noise as you work

» Playability
This title is approachable for fans and newcomers. Technical issues, like freezes and the framerate, get in the way of a smooth farming experience

» Entertainment
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town provides a new and entertaining farming adventure, but some design decisions hold it back from becoming a must-play entry

» Replay Value
Moderate

No franchise has been in the farming game as long as Story of Seasons, best known as Bokujo Monogatari in Japan (and previously known as Harvest Moon in North America). Celebrating its 25th anniversary, the series created a formula that's inspired hit games like Stardew Valley. But in recent years, it's struggled to stay relevant with fresh ideas. Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town tries to keep the flame alive by having you develop a town and providing fun features (like a photo mode and museum) to fill with discoveries. The loop is entertaining, but the rewards aren't satisfying enough to justify the investment required to get them.

Like its predecessors, Pioneers of Olive Town begins with you landing in a small village and starting a new life as a farmer. Olive Town is struggling, and the mayor asks for your help in turning it around. You receive development projects, which require you to gather the right materials to improve vital elements like roads, benches, and the town hall. Watching the city transform with each upgrade feels worthwhile, since more tourists come to the area and Olive Town begins to look much more attractive. However, don't expect to have much control over the town's transformation. You get asked questions as if your opinion and direction matters, but all answers lead to the same place, and going on fetch quest after fetch quest gets tiresome fast.

That being said, the core loop of taking a farm from nothing to a successful operation is still entertaining. I looked forward to every facility upgrade, new animal, or crafting recipe I unlocked. While you're wandering the wilderness, you can also now tame wild animals and bring them to the farm, meaning you're not always shelling out cash for new livestock. Money can come easy, but it's the materials you need for the crafting, townspeople requests, and building improvements that bring on the challenge. I didn't mind this at first; breaking rocks for ores, cutting down trees for lumber, and cleaning up puddles for clay is simple enough. But these items need to be processed in machines, and each machine has a singular purpose, from converting milk into cheese to turning wool into yarn. The problem? Not only are there far too many of them for each little thing, but inserting the required materials only produces one converted item, so if you need 50 of a specific type of lumber (and you will), it can take a maddening amount of time.

My journey through Pioneers of Olive Town was full of highs and lows. Things either came too easy, like wooing the townsperson of my choice, or required too much effort, like unlocking some farm facilities. I was impressed with how much there is to do, but it all comes at a cost. I felt like I could never spend time exploring certain aspects, such as creating clothing or getting into cooking, because they require precious time and feel insignificant compared to your other tasks.

Olive Town's areas seem small at first, but as you build bridges to new areas, meet Earth Sprites that take you to special locales, and search various caves with treasure-filled floors, things expand a great deal. You are constantly improving your skills as you do the basic tasks of tilling the land, cutting down trees, breaking rocks, and this in turns opens up more crafting recipes to get you things like automatic feeds for your livestock or decorative furniture. This provides a satisfying sense of your character progressing and new things to always look forward to.

I also enjoyed the fun little touches like being able to ride a motorcycle or use the various mounts to get around. Festivals are hit-or-miss, with some being more interactive than others. The game also provides a museum similar to Animal Crossing, where you can donate your treasures, fish, and photos you've taken of wildlife. Furniture and house upgrades are also aplenty, even though your house feels a little confined to where you can place things. You have this spacious layout, with only a selected, smaller area to really decorate as your own.

For those interested in the social aspects, you get new scenes at a steady rate by walking around the town and talking to villagers, which made me want to take the time to visit them. I looked forward to these scenes to learn more about the people in Olive Town, but overall, I didn't find this cast memorable or exciting. No one is outright annoying (except for maybe food critic Lovett), but the villagers simply fill their roles as shop owners and members of the community and offer nothing unique beyond that. The events as you progress in a romance fare much better, as they really do capture the chemistry and growth in your relationship.

I mostly had a pleasant time with Pioneers of Olive Town, but it isn't the most technically sound game. Patches have continued to improve my experience, but expect some annoying loading times, framerate issues (especially stuttering), and the occasional game freeze. Nothing caused me to stop playing in frustration, but be aware that this is still not the smoothest experience.

Pioneers of Olive Town is a decent Story of Seasons entry, but it's not more than that. I still got absorbed by the core formula of bettering my farm and loved making new discoveries as I explored. I have plenty of things I enjoy about this game, but encountered just as many that didn't hit the mark. I also can't get away from thinking, after all this time, shouldn't this series be making larger leaps forward and leaving a stronger impression? » **Kimberley Wallace**

It Takes Two

The joys and heartbreak of love

9.25

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
An expertly designed cooperative experience that pushes each player to do different things in concert to solve challenges

» Graphics
The worlds soar with realistic details. It's fun to see how ordinary objects are brought to life to either transform into bosses or NPCs

» Sound
Your characters often converse as the action unfolds, and the music fits the sequences well, even conjuring up familiar melodies of classics like "Flight of the Valkyries"

» Playability
Dozens of different gameplay ideas are explored, and none overstay their welcome. The variety is great, but the core platforming mechanics are not as reliable as they should be

» Entertainment
A roaring success both in its diverse co-op-driven gameplay and mature story themes that unfold in playful and heartfelt ways

» Replay Value
Moderately high

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 335

Style 2-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Hazelight **Release** March 26 **Rating** T

Beneath exhilarating rollercoaster rides and silly conversations with squirrels, It Takes Two has a heavy heart. It's about divorce and the toll it takes on a daughter who doesn't want to lose her family. It's about decaying love and the differences that divide us. It's about not wanting to face reality and not wanting to let go. It's also about hope and uncertainty, the past creating a better future, and finding common ground no matter how much it may hurt. All of these elements are beautifully woven into a colorful and soulful adventure that hits hard, both in its moving narrative and clever gameplay. It Takes Two succeeds in being a game that pushes two individuals to work together to create a relationship that lasts, but for how long?

In an emotional opening shot, we see a little girl named Rose run off to her play space after her parents, Cody and May, tell her they are separating. She's devastated and keeps saying she just wants them to be "friends" again. As hard as it is for Rose to accept the news, we learn she's been expecting it. Not only has she made two wooden figures of her parents to play make-believe with – to show them the way she wants them to be – she's also secretly purchased a "Book of Love" to learn how to make them care about each other again.

Rose's tears fall from her cheeks onto the figures and book, conjuring magical forces that sweep through the house. When we next see Cody and May, their souls have been passed to their miniature, wooden and clay counterparts. As these two adults rightfully panic in their new bodies, the Book of Love greets them as an upbeat, comical figure named Dr. Hakim, who promises to help them mend the bond they once shared. The entire adventure is told from this diminutive perspective and delivers a nicely-written story that unfolds amid treacherous action sequences. The blending of narration and gameplay works incredibly well, giving you plenty of insight into the minds of Cody and May as they leap about and race to find a way to return to their normal lives (and sizes).

Dr. Hakim doesn't want them to move so fast, however, and thinks they should stay small to work out their differences. This somewhat nefarious desire is brilliantly transformed into the foundation of the adventure. As the name of the game implies, It Takes Two can only be played cooperatively by two people, either sitting on a couch together or online. While each player is asked to complete individual platforming challenges, not much progress can be made unless the duo is working together. Almost every significant movement demands teamwork, communication, and patience between the two players. Even when playing online, the screen is always split in two so you can see exactly what your partner is doing, an excellent touch that allows for the other player to problem solve with verbal guidance.

Cody and May share the same basic moves, but have different tools to use in each world. This makes them feel distinct and sets the stage for one person to have ownership over a specific type of action. For instance, Cody has explosive gel, but it can only be detonated with May's rifle. Later in the game, Cody can change sizes, while May is equipped with magnetic boots – an odd pairing that lets both characters interact with the world in different ways to open up new routes. Combining the actions of both players is used in almost every sequence, which are usually wonderfully designed, delivering plenty of laughs, edge-of-your-seat moments, and a unique flow that necessitates teamwork.

While It Takes Two will be talked about for its cooperative-only design and subject matter, developer Hazelight's biggest triumph is the variety in action. Just when it seems like a particular gameplay idea has been explored fully, the action transforms into something new, taking you for a fun ride before expiring and presenting another idea. It's amazing how many different concepts get explored, almost coming across like a greatest hits of everything you can do in action games.

The core gameplay of running and jumping is consistent in every world, but the problem-solving elements are always being shaken up. Some of these ideas work better than others, but most of Hazelight's attempts are incredibly well executed, such as riding on the back of a magical catfish, roaring down an icy slope in a bobsled, or using a fidget spinner to launch into the air.

The platforming is sophisticated, requiring double jumps and air dashes, along with rope swings and more. None of these actions are completely reliable or as fluid as you want them to be, but are good enough to get the job done (especially with liberal checkpointing). Hazelight is quite aware of just how often timing missteps can occur and aids the player by having characters automatically be pulled to a ledge rather than miss.

It Takes Two may not be the platforming juggernaut that it aspires to be, but it more than makes up for it with its big heart, wealth in variety, and gorgeous imagery. All of its individual actions are things we've done in other games, but when applied to this distinct cooperative approach, they take on a whole new life and are used in wonderful ways over a long adventure. The action will have you laughing and screaming at your TV, and the story stays strong throughout, creating the backbone for an entertaining adventure that roars with excitement, and should keep you glued to the controller to see if this couple's lost love can be rekindled.

» Andrew Reiner

Devotion

A frightening homecoming

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Red Candle Games **Developer** Red Candle Games **Release** February 19, 2019 **Rating** M

Devotion raised every hair on my body and had me questioning my decision to play it within the first few minutes of stepping into its twisted world. As I braved its dangers, I understood why it earned acclaim when it first launched in February 2019. Unfortunately, only days after that initial release, the game was pulled from online storefronts after a controversy surrounding an in-game joke at the expense of China's president. Two years later, developer Red Candle Games has finally made Devotion available again. Horror fans who missed it the first time around shouldn't wait; Devotion is a terrifying and memorable adventure worthy of its reputation.

The bulk of this unnerving experience involves exploring a small apartment in Taiwan over the course of several years in the 1980s. You learn the tragic story of a family torn apart by marital turmoil, professional setbacks, and the stress of raising a chronically ill child. Gameplay consists of collecting clues and items to solve a series of well-made (and sometimes interconnected) puzzles that are satisfying yet stressful to complete because you know there's usually something sinister waiting around the next corner. Movement is deliberate without feeling slow and that's for a reason; every time I turned around I braced for the worst – and often found it.

Devotion's psychological scares keep you on your toes and do a great job of being effective while maintaining impressive creativity. The apartment changes depending on the year, so new types of scares are regularly surfacing, whether it's something as blatant as a mannequin-laden birthday party or an elaborate mechanical diorama sequence. Thanks to the fantastic sound design (I recommend headphones), simply hearing doors slam or windows rattle from a thunderstorm is enough to have you holding your breath in expectation of the worst. Devotion loves messing with your mind, and it kept me on edge to the point that I was jumping at things that weren't even there because the atmosphere is so oppressive.

As miserable as I often felt stepping into the next chilling iteration of that cursed apartment, I love and admire Devotion's commitment to scaring the pants off of you without devolving into cheap or largely predictable tactics. This is a smartly laid out haunted house that seems to know the perfect moments to hit the pedal on the scares before easing back, but it never turns off the gas completely. I also respect that Devotion isn't a one-trick pony. The story eventually ventures beyond small confines into more otherworldly settings, though it loses a bit of its punch in doing so. However, I like how the puzzle design evolves into more free-form scenarios after a linear beginning.

Devotion may be terrifying, but it also offers a compelling narrative with a surprising amount of heart. The story is ultimately about a child coping with terrible parents on top of her own troubles, and her anxieties made me sympathetic while also creating another, more relatable trauma: the fear of losing your family. You don't want to see any harm come to this poor kid, especially after a fantastic whimsical sequence where you read her favorite storybook together. These lighter moments aren't plentiful, but they're awesome for allowing you to exhale for a bit. They also further demonstrate Red Candles' chops when it comes to mixing up the adventure with different gameplay ideas.

Devotion wraps up before it loses steam, making it a tightly packed house of horrors worth braving. It's a shame that the game was inaccessible to players for as long as it was, but now you can enjoy one of the creepiest titles in recent memory. If you can muster up the courage, you'll be rewarded with a delightfully disturbing experience that deserves a chance to terrify a broader audience. » **Marcus Stewart**

9

PC

» **Concept**
Uncover the fate of a small, troubled family by exploring their apartment in different time periods while confronting a host of supernatural phenomena

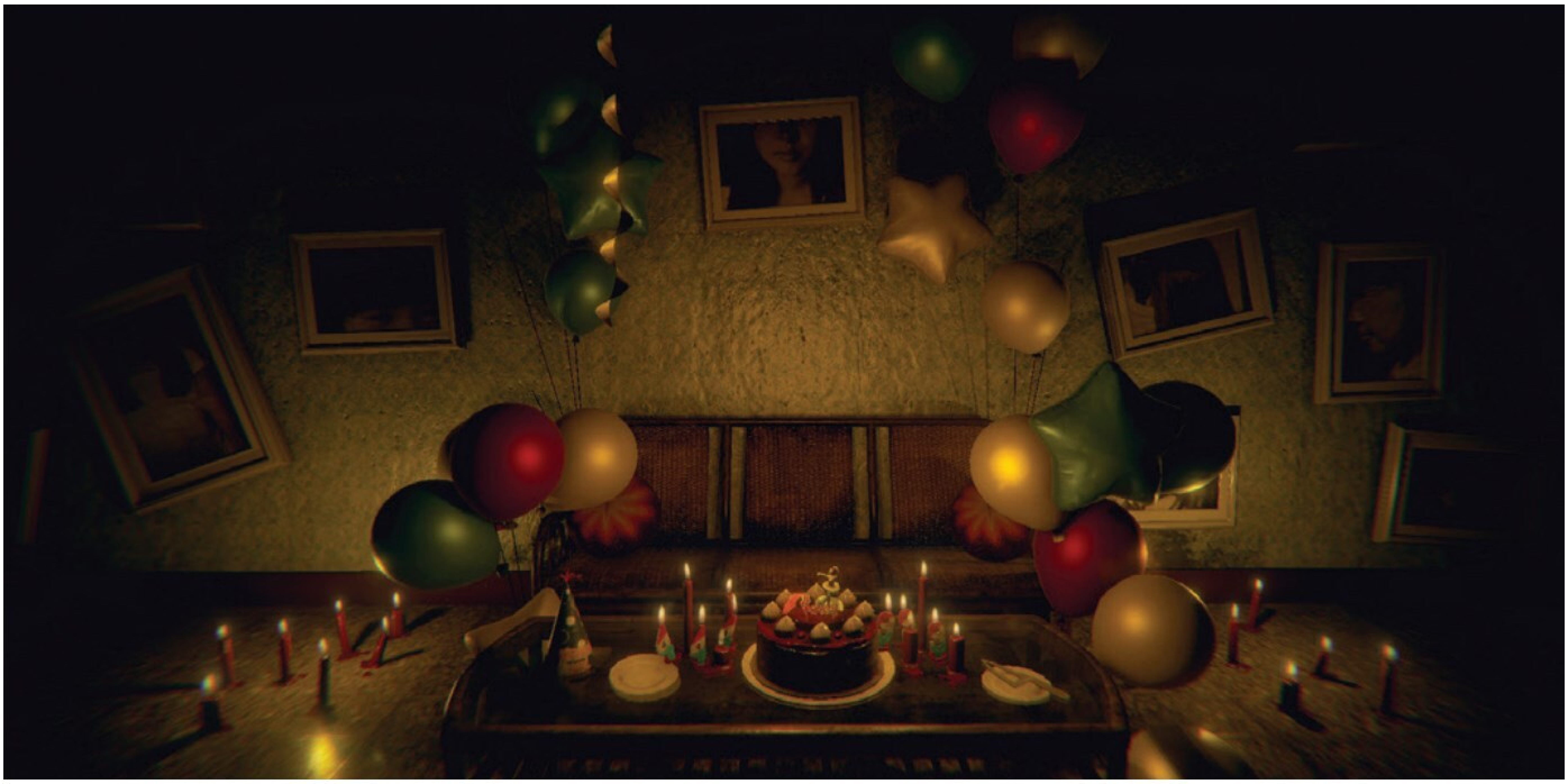
» **Graphics**
The spaces are packed with detail, and the ever-shifting imagery keeps you on edge

» **Sound**
Excellent sound design makes every strained creak or gust of wind as alarming as any apparition

» **Playability**
Movement is appropriately deliberate without feeling slow or tedious

» **Entertainment**
Devotion's powerful atmosphere, frightening sequences, and fascinating story make it a creative gauntlet of scares

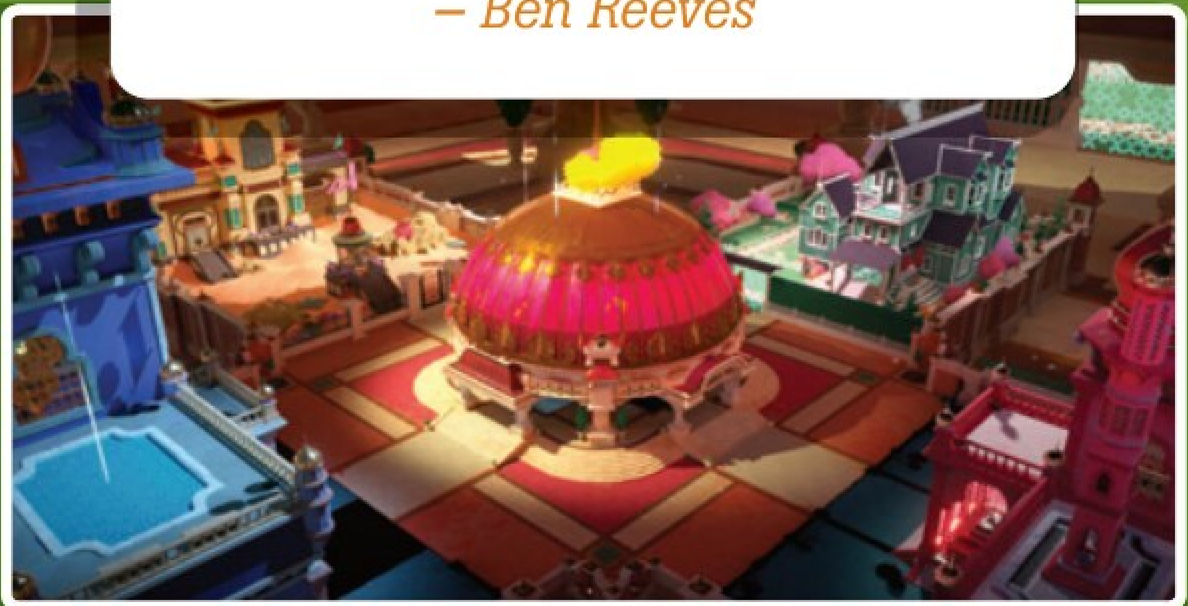
» **Replay Value**
Moderate

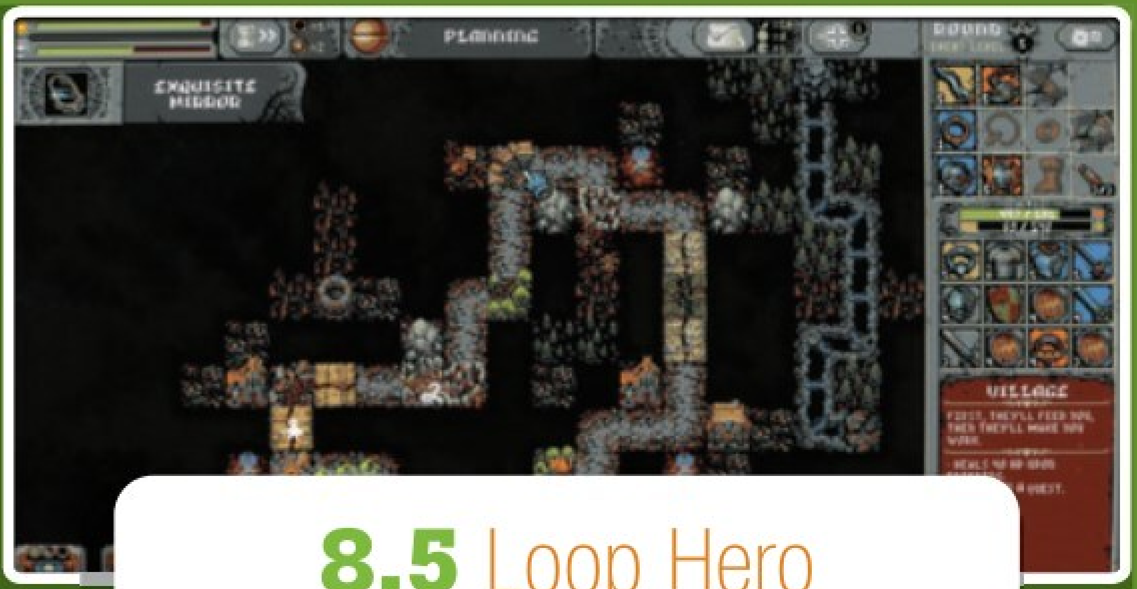


7.75 Maquette

Platform PS5 • PS4 • PC **Release** March 2 **Rating** E10+

When Maquette is firing on all cylinders, it's a beautiful journey through a series of ever-larger environments, and its love story is poignant and a little heartbreaking. Sadly, my interactions with the puzzles were also full of heartbreak. – Ben Reeves





8.5 Loop Hero

Platform PC **Release** March 4 **Rating** NR

Loop Hero is a creative and clever little game that should be on your radar if you enjoy strategy, RPGs, deckbuilders, roguelikes, or all of the above. While its novelty begins to wither the further you get away from the opening hours, the journey is worthwhile and engaging. – Daniel Tack

7.75 Mundaun

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release March 16 **Rating** M

With a creepy vibe, solid gameplay, and intriguing narrative, Mundaun is a good time even if it won't blow away horror veterans. It's worth checking out if you're looking to experience a few good scares and to see its wicked art direction in motion. – Marcus Stewart

8 Rogue Heroes: Ruins Of Tasos

Platform Switch • PC
Release February 23 **Rating** E10+

Rogue Heroes: Ruins of Tasos places the player on a fantasy journey of progression, puzzle-solving, and adventure; a jaunt that is clearly inspired by older entries in The Legend of Zelda series, like A Link to the Past. – Daniel Tack

7.25 Curse Of The Dead Gods

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release February 23 **Rating** T

Curse of the Dead Gods is a solid roguelite, though it doesn't attempt anything revolutionary or ambitious. Its familiar approach to genre-specific structure makes it easy to dive right in without fearing a loss of challenge. – Liana Ruppert

7 Evil Genius 2: World Domination

Platform PC **Release** March 30 **Rating** NR

Just like Dr. Evil from Austin Powers, the Evil Genius name has been on ice a long time, and despite being full of nefarious intent, this sequel's methods feel outdated on the current world stage. – Joe Juba

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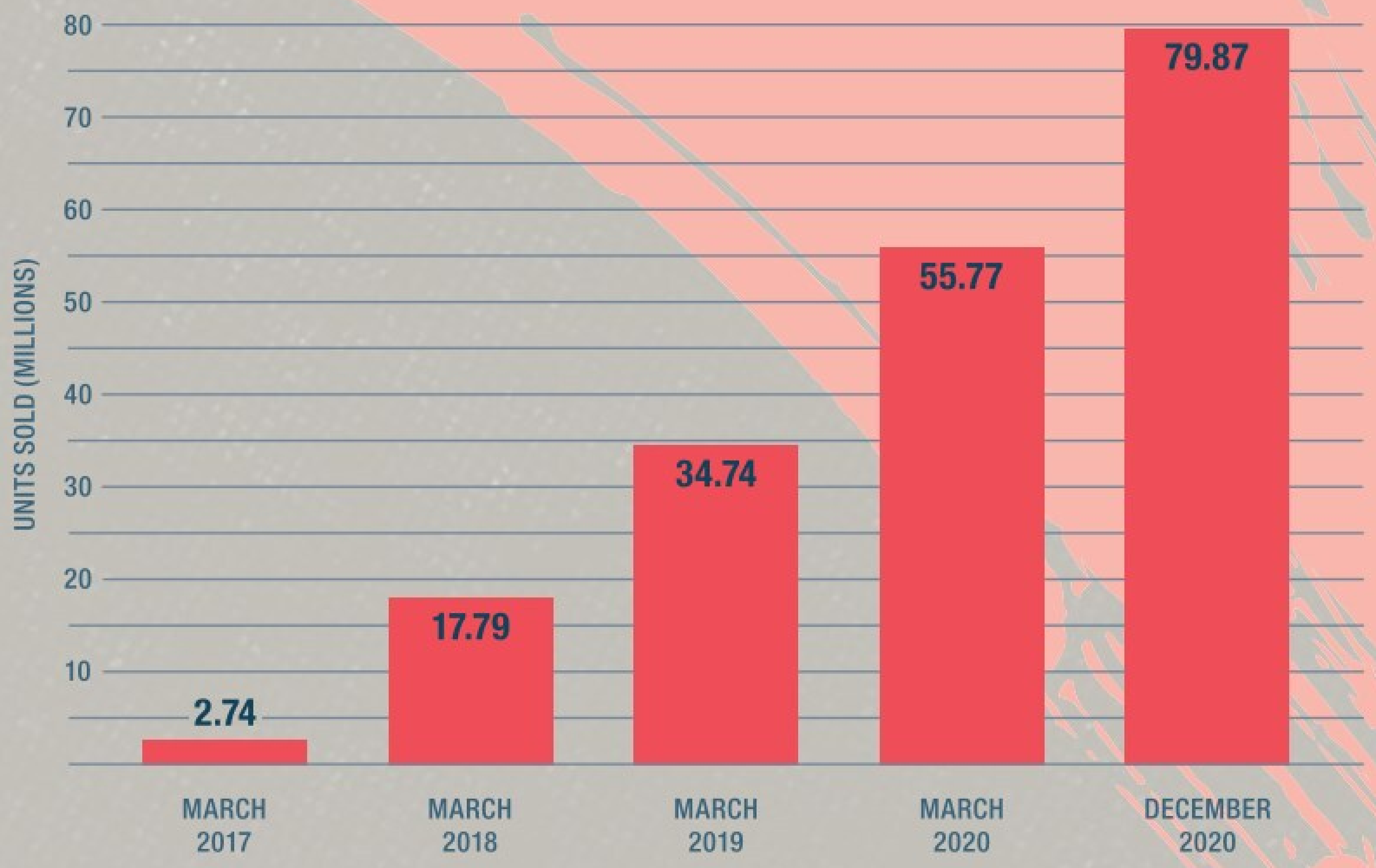
NINTENDO SWITCH BY THE NUMBERS

The Nintendo Switch has been an undeniable success for Nintendo since the console debuted in 2017. We decided to look back at the handheld hybrid's several years on the market, breaking down its exponential growth – especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

HARDWARE SALES



TOTAL SOFTWARE SALES

532.34 MILLION

In August 2020, in a fiscal report, Nintendo announced that its operating profits rose to 427.7%, due in large part to the demand for Nintendo Switch units during lockdown and stay-at-home orders.

BEST-SELLING GAMES

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe	33.41 MILLION
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild	21.45 MILLION
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate	22.85 MILLION
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	31.18 MILLION
Pokémon Sword & Shield	20.35 MILLION

Of every game released on the Switch, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is the only game *Game Informer* has given a 10/10 review score. Additionally, it's tied with Super Mario Odyssey for the highest Metacritic score of any Switch game at 97/100. ◆

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EXACT SCIENCES

Jamie Foxx for Stand Up To Cancer. Photo By G L Askew II

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